Alone

Elchikaah Haly

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Summary

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Description:

A rumor among Treno citizens spoke of the powerful, fearless Tribal nobles, who they called the Tailed Brothers, that were capable of defeating an army by themselves. Yet, Kuja knew Zidane's only true fear. To be alone. An AU story where Zidane was never thrown away on Gaia, where Kuja and Zidane grew together as Terra's saviors and Angels of Death.

Prologue

Zidane's a bad guy in this fic, kind of.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Prologue

Under the sunset of this strange world, his vision blurred by the tears, his stinging eyes were drifting to a crimson shade. The uncontrollable hiccups of his throat were far from stopping and the pain at the top of his cheeks thwarted him from moving his lips to speak.

He still couldn't believe how miserable it felt to cry like a lost child when he had just reached adulthood. He thought that, by now, he should have outgrown that childish behavior, one thing that was always in the way of his actions, of his plans through his life. Grown men shouldn't cry. The same grown men had always told behind his back that he was strong and that crying was for the weak. So why was he still crying? Why could he not get over it and move on?

Why did he even possess emotions?

That sorrow overwhelming his senses was causing this inconvenient pain in the heart and in the mind, a pain worse than any inflicted physical injuries that had been so close to slaughter him several times in his life. It was a pain he wished to get rid of. It was a bother, an obstacle to his now fictional, unconceivable joy, and yet…

His past, while filled with malevolent events and malicious intents, had thrived with happiness and warmth, thanks to these same painful emotions.

Emotions were some nice additions to his life, a feature he should thank his now meaningless creator for. They made him up, forged him up, into the creature that he was now, powerful and perfect. Yes, the imperfection of his emotive surges was coveted by his creator when he had projected to conceive his “perfect” one.

This catastrophe spread around him was the reward for owning a soul since his birth, or rather his creation, as an infant.

Emotions were confusing. He understood them, and yet, he did not understand them. It angered him and it was driving him into rage and insanity.

How he wished to rip everything apart.

But of course, not everything. He would never tear his brother apart, the one he was holding tight in his arms. The poor brother, still and pale complex, nothing twitching nor moving but the gentle flow of his soft, dancing silver hair and the brushing fur of his tail. His lips were forever struck with a weak, yet heartbroken sulk. His sky-colored, lifeless eyes stared to the emptiness of the horizon where wide mountains and tall mushroom-like structures stood upright in the distance. Their bases, hidden by a panoply of destroyed airships and surrounded by thousands of bloodied corpses emanating the stench of a battlefield, reflected into his bare, clear orbits.

The sight from his brother’s eyes was so beautiful.

Beautiful, yes, one word to describe his brother that matched him perfectly, even when each of his beautiful features were drenched with dirt, dried blood and some scarce flies buzzing around. These were devouring bit by bit the former, glorious physique that used to make him up. Even his stiffened muscles were still shaping him into the slender, attractive young man, despite death having claimed him.

It’d been a day already, he thought. He wasn’t certain anymore. So much had happened in the recent days, and the concept of time was already lost on him. After all these days, he still could not find himself to leave the body, to mourn the death of his loved one, his dear older sibling and former caregiver.

The young man who had not changed in the past sixteen years.

Kuja…

Zidane stroked Kuja’s hair and cheeks. He hushed soft, comforting and amicable words to him, not concerned that he will not get any response, having no care that his soul was long gone. Kuja’s soul must have joined the cycle of souls, perhaps to be reborn and restart anew without any part of his memories, without his experiences of the past, without the care and love he had provided his sibling. Without memories of his family, Zidane was forgotten. No one loved him anymore.

He was alone.

Living his biggest fear.

Zidane had dreaded of being alone since he came to be, and there he was, with no one to look up to,

with no one to look after him, with no one to love. He wasn't sure what to make out of it, now that he had gone through his one and only fear of knowing he will be alone for the rest of his life. How he longed to be a small child again, watching his big brother smile at him, hugging him, teasing him, teaching him. He crawled himself between Kuja's hardened arms like he used to do when he was a child, craving for his warmth like an offspring provided with a parent's love. He called his brother's name over and over, expecting a reply.

Getting no answered prompted intensifying tears. His bawls were now wild.

He was truly alone, and he was afraid.

"***Zidane…***"

That voice calling him in his mind… It was familiar, yet distant and unknown. It stirred Zidane away from his terrifying solitude. Alerted, he launched himself and landed on his feet, his daggers unsheathed and ready for another massacre. However, the instant he spotted a group of people heading toward him, he froze. The blinding sunset behind them hid the shape of their bodies. Yet, when he allowed some time for his vision to sharpen in spite of the light, he perceived clearer details on the

one leading the group to him, a silhouette that was somehow familiar to him.

Unlike them, Zidane did not manifest the same familiarity toward that individual with the same privilege of owning a soul.

After all, how could he call that person a sister after having been separated from her for so long?

Mikoto…

The closer the young girl and the group were getting, the deeper Zidane's brows furrowed. He remained silent and still, intending on protecting his brother's body from these despicable people. They were the reason for his demise, for causing his biggest fear, for inflicting the painful injuries in his mind and soul.

For killing Kuja.

"***You have… succeeded…***"

"In what?!" he snarled at the girl who kept perturbing him inside his mind. His rage burst over his diminishing sadness as such he bared his teeth and growled at the group in fury.

The individuals behind the girl took a step back with a gasp, dreading of the assassin who might

launch at them at any moment. However, Mikoto hushed at her kin to calm themselves and tried to let them know that she was in total control of the situation. The group took more steps back, but the teen girl walked ahead, certain of herself. Zidane gave her a long, chilling stare, studying her features.

She looked so much like him in appearance… just like the others behind her.

“Gaia’s crystal…” Mikoto began slowly, this time using her own voice as she detected the frustration in the young man’s mind when she had used their telepathic links. Zidane settled down when he noticed the guilt and sorrow in her eyes. “… has been assimilated by Terra’s crystal. It is thanks to you for having defeated the Gaian armies. Gaia’s crystal has gotten weak enough to allow Terra’s crystal to take over. The fusion is a complete success.”

Well, that certainly explained the difference to his surroundings. He had never seen these tall mushroom-like structures on Gaia before, but he had been so busy dealing with his fear that he had paid them no heed, until now. “Oh,” he said, dumbfounded by the revelation.

The girl carried on with the same monotone voice. “The Genomes are starting to welcome the Terran souls. You have revived Terra. We can only be grateful.”

Grateful? About what?! He was alone now. They had shoved him fear and pain. He had no care for thanks.

Yet, his demise progressed into a greater doom. When he thought he would never have to hear the voice of that old man again…

“***Zidane, my Angel of Death.***”

That deep voice speaking in his mind… That fucking, annoying voice that had haunted him and his brother for their entire lives…

“***I knew you were the perfect one. I knew you would succeed. I thank you, for helping me, for helping us, for saving Terra.***”

That old man, Garland…

A wave of outrage and regret resurged. A blend of terror, sadness and madness flooded his confused soul. The voice of the old man pulled out the killing instincts from the depth of his mind, the very same features that made him the Angel of Death persona

his master had desired from him since his creation. Right now, they resurfaced, pushing him to a lust for another carnage which Zidane will enjoy.

When he threw another low growl out of his throat, his body gave away a faint light glow as fur began to cover his exposed body…

Trance, what a cathartic sensation…

Author's note*: English's not my main language, so if you've got comments about English grammar/orthography/syntax issues, please let me know!*

Chapter 1: Prototype

Guess who's being introduced and growing in this chapter. Also, thanks to the guest who left a comment and anyone who fav!

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Chapter 1: Prototype

Twenty-four years ago…

Life flicked and stirred it out from its artificial stasis.

Finally. The creature he had shaped into the very definition of beauty, a being of marvel that all eyes shall casted upon its presence, made its first movements. Its slender body, its soft, pale skin along with its long, feathery silver hair and its elongated, furred silver tail bathed in the radiance of blue, all in their peaceful slumber in the tank. Molded with the image of gods, it bore an outstanding appearance which differed it from all its other kin.

Crouched in a fetal position like a natural newborn, it remained afloat, unaware of the world

where it will find its new existence and soul.

A living soul.

Eyes shut, it waited for its sleeping soul to take shape of this perfect vessel, a host for life. Only when life will shine upon its eyes, it will discover its surroundings, its purpose of life, its purpose as the savior of Terra. Tasked to bring life and death for its purpose, it shall be given a title worthy of its importance.

An Angel of Death.

Yes, a prototype, a first version of Terra's angel and savior. Even if it had taken him years to forge and construct the perfect Genome specimen, he had no choice but to implement it limitations. A prototype wasn't meant to live, but it should live long enough to live up to its purpose, if it will ever achieve this. Should it stop, he will create a second angel, a second prototype and a version better of the perfection floating in the tank before him. At most, it should stop after short twenty-four years of Gaian life, the prime years of a normal, sentient adult in term of strength and will.

No, at this point, he should no longer call this creature an "it". It possessed the genitals of what

made up a male specimen of average height. To be precise, “he” was the perfect Genome, his precious Angel of Death, the harbinger of war and the savior of the ancient masters of his homeland.

He had crafted this specimen to be born a young adult like most of his Genome creations. Yet, this one will be the bearer of beauty and charm, one who should be able to manipulate others’ will with his appearance alone. He will be born with a great knowledge of language comprehension and speech like the rest of his siblings, meaning he will be quick to understand his meaning of life, thus ready to hold conversations with him and the Gaians. He will know the basic skills of eating, socializing, toileting, everything that will make him a fully capable citizen of the Gaian society. With the soul he gifted him, no sane or insane Gaians will be able to tell him apart from another brethren. He will be a normal human of beauty with a long silver tail to match the appearance of the ancient Terrans.

With his social skills and look, he will propel Gaia into a fast catalyst that will lead to the rebirth of Terra, the planet of his creators. After all, his initial plan to plant the gigantic parasitic Iifa Tree on Gaia millenniums ago had recently begun to follow the path of failure, even after creating the Soul

Divider to disrupt the cycle of souls faster. With the work of the Iifa Tree and the Soul Divider to create the Mist to send the creatures of Gaia into wars crumbling to dust with the invention of the airships fueled by the Mist, he had to plan something else to incite a war. Wars were the fastest way to bring death upon the world. Death by mass, combined with the Iifa Tree and the Soul Divider together, meant no soul will reach Gaia's crystal. Without any soul returning to the crystal meant it will weaken, perhaps, one day, enough for Terra's crystal to fusion with Gaia's crystal, thus saving Terra's dormant souls.

When the eyes of the specimen began to flicker, Garland knew it was time to let his precious angel out.

As soon as Garland took hold of the control stand, the fluid sank down and vanished from the tank, leaving the slumbering Genome on the ground surface. The cables attached to his limbs and the synthetic umbilical cord automatically detached from him, freeing the creature from everything that had nourished him so far. From now on, he will have to sustain by himself, something he should be capable of. After the machine dried the sleeping

specimen, the pod opened, letting Garland give a cautious inspection on his creation.

Slowly, the angel opened his lids, revealing his bright, intense blue eyes filled with a young, pure and uncorrupted soul bursting with life. Stirring from his torpor, the silver-haired Genome blinked, confused with the life that was granted to him, surprised by his own moving limbs before a small rush glimmered into them like an electrostatic charge running across his body.

Minutes elapsed. The young Genome was able to make normal use of his limbs, including his moving furred appendage which he now stared at with a sparkle of curiosity. This gave him awareness of his own existence, of his life into the world of unknown which he will be tasked to explore, to destroy and to revive.

To explore, he’ll have to look at his surroundings. His shining blue eyes stumbled upon the dark tall creature before him. His vision trailed after the being from his feet until it latched upon his eyes that were filled with authority.

“It is time for you to rise, my Angel of Death.”

Startled by the sudden spoken voice of the dark creature, the Genome bumped slightly from his position. From his instincts, he knew the creature had addressed him by the look in his eyes and the tone of voice, but he was not sure what to make out of them. He was the very subject of whatever the thing said. The Genome remained static and his stare narrowed with a blend of curiosity and concern.

“You are a prototype, a special Genome gifted with a soul on your own with a free will. With it, you will serve me. You will be tasked with the purpose of creating a war that will kill the Gaians. You will be the harbinger of Gaia’s death and the savior of Terra.”

The entire time Garland had spoken the words, the prototype had not let his sight away from him. The way he talked and his deep tone intrigued him, like he wanted to find out more of this personage. He didn’t know why he should be listened, but he knew he had to pay attention, or he might suffer some consequences.

However, there was something else that caught his concern. When he was able to control his limbs, he soon found out that his furred tail moved on its own and couldn’t be controlled that easily. Curious

about it, he grabbed it with his hands, shocked to feel the touch of his own appendage like it should not be part of his body. Perplexed by the Genome's sudden lack of attention, Garland adopted a louder tone, getting his awareness once again.

"Yes, you are to bring wars onto the world of Gaia. You will be the catalyst of the calamity needed to disrupt the cycle of souls. With the help of the Iifa Tree and Soulcage, the souls you will wipe out will not be able to return to Gaia's crystal, and it will weaken without its souls. Only then, we will fusion Terra and Gaia's crystals to form the new Terra. You will revive the Terran souls and our ancient civilization back to its glory, with the Terrans living in the new world."

The prototype blinked. He still was uncertain of anything or how important the dark man made his words sounded like. Suddenly, he blinked more rapidly when a dust was caught in the orbit of an eye. The Genome was overwhelmed by an abrupt need of rubbing his eye to get that bothersome dust out. Garland had lost the Genome's attention once more and he huffed with an obvious exasperation, hoping for the prototype to notice it.

But nothing was obvious to a creature that had just barely been born to the unknown.

“Because you are gifted with a soul, unlike the rest of your kin, I shall provide you with a proper name. You will be named after the God of War from the ancient Terra. Your name will be Kuja.”

The name arose another sparkle into the Genome’s eyes, like that particular word will bear its importance through his life. It was like an honor to own a name, and because of it, the prototype struggled with his tongue and his lips to use them for the first time in his short existence. He wished to imitate the man into speaking the word, clear and sharp.

“… K-Ku… ja… aa…” the young Genome tried to speak, but it did not come out like he wanted.

And Garland certainly didn’t want Kuja’s speech to come out like this either.

Troubled by his creation’s way of speaking, the old android man raised an eyebrow. He had spent years crafting Kuja into perfection, and he was starting to see the many subtle flaws into his angel. No, Kuja was supposed to be the absolute Genome. He should, at least, be able to understand everything

his master said! Garland added, “Kuja is your name, yes.”

Hearing the word a second time brought more attention and light to the young prototype. “Kuja… i-is your n-name, yes,” he parroted after his master in such a shaking voice that’d remind Garland of a young toddler speaking his first sentence.

At least, his speech was becoming better, but this was not enough for the old android man. This whole meeting session was not only becoming tiresome, but it caused uncertainties to Garland. This was not right… Wasn’t Kuja supposed to have a basic knowledge of language comprehension like the rest of his Genome siblings? All the previous soulless Genomes he had created were able to hold conversations and understand everything he said from the second they were out of their creation pods, so what was wrong with his Angel of Death? He was supposed to be a special case.

Technically speaking, if these flaws truly made him, then Kuja was still a special case…

Decided to take a more authoritarian posture with his folded robotic arms, Garland approached the smaller creature and asked him another important

question. “Do you actually understand the purpose and meaning of your life?”

Disappointed that the important word hadn’t been spoken, Kuja lost the interest Garland sought from him. The young Genome went back into poking his moving tail by trying to get total control over it, and he became frustrated to see that he was failing at it. The dark old man grew more worried and anxious of his angel’s lack of attention. “Kuja,” Garland called, and this time, Kuja turned to him, the light of curiosity coming back in his eyes. “You need to pay attention.”

“Kuja, you need t—”

“ENOUGH!”

The instinct of fear rushing in for the first time ever in his brief life, Kuja yelped to Garland’s sudden scream at him. Scared of the man, the puny Genome rushed by crawling to a corner of the room few meters away and bent himself into a fetal position, shivering and fearing for his life. Still completely visible to the mean old man, Kuja’s despair rose as he tried hiding his self with his tail and arms, thinking it’d cover him from any intent just like a dreading toddler would have done.

Garland realized his first mistake into conceiving this unique Genome. Kuja was not an adult as he appeared. Behind the veil of a beautiful young adult man was the soul of a simple, ignorant youth. Kuja was a child in mind.

Dammit.

Of course, the man-child was in complete view to the furious old man. His anger rising, Garland came closer to Kuja, projecting his shadow over the trembling Genome whose eyes were filled with terror, the terror to see his life and soul taken away. He had been barely born into this world but he already feared to return to the world of the nothingness he just came from. As Garland approached, Kuja's shivering intensified and he soon hid his face against his knees.

Breathing heavily, Garland widened his orbits and furrowed his brows, exhibiting anger and exhaustion to the scared Genome. "J-Just… stop repeating everything I say!" Even without hearing the important word, or rather, the name, Kuja knew the mean old man was addressing him. He didn't understand his master's words, but from the strange facial expression on the man's face and his tone of voice, he knew this was not meant to be nice. After

all, Kuja could understand the meaning of displayed reactions.

Kuja knew he was being threatened and he feared for his life, because this old man had the absolute power to take it away from him at any time, he could tell.

Thankfully for the frail Genome, Garland did not bring him to his end. The old man took a step back, allowing light to be cast upon him again. While Kuja had settled down, he still was afraid of dying by the old man. Garland couldn't help but sigh, already exasperated by his own creation after only few minutes of awareness. His thoughts were filled with concerns over the prospect of Kuja's next years. What will the future yield for his first Angel of Death? Was this how he should conceive his next angel?

No! He had created a mistake, a failure!

"He is supposed to understand everything I say!" Garland exclaimed his frustrated thoughts out loud, never minding if Kuja understood his raging words or not. His angel's reaction no longer mattered. "His soulless brethren were created to understand everything from the start, just as he is! Where did I go wrong? Is this because I have provided him with

a soul? Is he truly a failed prototype? So many years were poured and wasted to mold and forge him into perfection! This is no perfection, no strategist, no harbinger of war! This is nothing but a newborn in the body of a man!”

Later that day, when Garland came back to check on his only Genome with a soul in the room he left him, Kuja sat in the same corner, maintaining the same terrified pose. Garland gave the man-child a long stare, which picked up the young creature’s interest. Garland noticed the sparks of life and potential in his longing blue eyes, and after giving it another thought, he decided it might be better letting this one live on and perhaps succeed or fail with his given purpose of life. After all, his calculation of his granted twenty-four years lifespan will be enough to shape this unique Genome into something more convenient for that period of time. Discarding his soul to make him like his soulless siblings would bring nothing but more wasted years from having confectioned his Angel of Death.

Garland will have to take notes of this one’s failures and successes. Observing Kuja experiencing

his life with a soul was the key to conceive a better Angel.

Somehow, the old man was glad he had allowed him a chance.

Kuja learned how to speak and understood words fast enough. In one month of existence, the newborn had become closer to what made up a true young man, having learned how to read, to speak on his own without parroting his master and his kin, and thus holding more complex conversations. He could count, explore and use cognitive responses and reactions like a sentient creature with a soul. He even understood the meaning of his life as well as important concepts like life and death, the planets Terra and Gaia and more sophisticated knowledge.

Thanks to his developing mind, Kuja soon deemed his soulless Genome kin as boring and uninteresting. With so few living things on Terra, his curiosity on life were drawn toward the few scarce monsters on his planet, the friendly but rare Moogles, the aggressive Silver Dragons that Garland had created millenniums ago and finally, his master himself, Garland. The evidence that Kuja had begun to avoid the other Genomes for being boring marked this as a part of his successes. That will of his own

was the reason Garland had created him to begin with. With that will, his angel will be able to comply with his commands without being given too literal orders like he had to do with the other Genomes.

But providing a being a personality of his own had its downsides.

For the first few months of his life, Kuja had no one except Master Garland. The Moogles avoided him for being too familiar with Garland as they feared the old man. The monsters roaming on Terra were too aggressive to even let Kuja approach them, like they were devoid of souls but instead were filled with nothing but instincts. The few Silver Dragons soaring around were the fruit of a reproduction program, which few selected Genomes were tasked to give them care and sustenance so they will be released to Gaia later. For his safety, Kuja was forbidden to approach them. With only Garland to hold conversation with, Kuja clung to him wherever he was going.

But the old android man despised being constantly followed and he would shoo the unique Genome away.

Kuja was unable to grasp why, but he didn’t like being shooed away. So, he continued to cling to his

master, thinking it was the right thing to do until he was given a violent slap on the cheek that hurled him hard to the ground.

For the first time, Kuja experienced physical pain and the sight of blood. His body hurt, but it also hurt beneath his core because he sensed the indifference and the hate from everyone. He had discovered suffering, and he didn't like it either.

Why did Garland hate him? And if he hated him, why did Garland monitor him on hourly basis? The old man provided him clothes, food and home, but he hated him. Kuja did not understand, and it enraged him.

It was around this time Garland began to see more changes in Kuja's behavior, where the young Genome was starting to avoid his master's presence and disobey some carefully chosen orders. Garland was seen as his sole parental figure, and he became a means of challenge. From what the old man had been taught from the ancient living Terrans, Kuja acted like anyone in a growth phase called adolescence. Teenagers sought adventures and exciting thrills that offered shivers down their spine, and defying Garland was becoming his one of his favorite pastimes.

Kuja, it is time for you to learn your lessons about Gaia's continents.

No.

Kuja, come eat.

No.

Kuja, if you do not comply with my order, you know the consequences.

Shut up, old man.

Calling him "old man" was one of the first deeper signs determining the assets that will make Kuja what he will be later. Garland saw this as another development needed for Kuja to become a rightful Angel of Death, and yet, he could not get himself to accept that nickname. Why did he hate that name so much?

Possibly because it was the first time in his five-thousand years of existence that Garland was being called something else than "Master Garland". Just as Kuja had to adapt himself to his surrounding environment, Garland will have no choice but to do the same with his angel. After all, he had to let him live to note his faults.

Soon, rather than showing any interest in the knowledge that Garland was trying to assimilate in him, Kuja spent hours into his given meager home alone reading books depicting science and magic. Thanks to his curiosity, the Genome quickly learned how to turn his spiritual powers into magic spells, with Fire as his first. He came to learn of the basic scientific terms and concepts used by the ancient Terrans which he wished to develop to make life easier for all. This side of Kuja came out as a convenience to Garland, one of the few successes he took note of his angel since the Genome was created to be a vessel with a grandiose potential for magic. To Garland, magic and science were the keys to start a successful war on Gaia.

However, Kuja showed no interest into using these assets and talents for Garland's scheme, nor that he truly wanted to destroy lives on another planet.

At least, not yet.

In fact, Garland had yet to send Kuja on Gaia to explore its civilization. To start a war, Kuja will have to learn about Gaian cultures. Knowing about science and magic will come to nothing if the young man never experienced Gaia's life himself.

To propel Kuja into learning about Gaia, Garland sent him to the least occupied continent on the planet to begin gradually. Shoving him into a Gaian civilization too fast might have negative repercussions on him, and the least Garland wished was to see Kuja fail furthermore. The ancient Gaians used to call this area the Outer Continent, where there was no Mist to contaminate the minds of the living things.

He was not even certain if his plan to send Kuja on the Outer Continent was fruitful.

During his first time on Gaia, Kuja did not find much intriguing living species even though they were said to all possess a soul. There was not much except for the rare vegetation and small creatures called insects. Plants were simple multicellular beings with no features for the normal communication he was familiar with, created by the planet's seeds to sustain others' lives and to produce the oxygen needed to breathe. Insects were invertebrates that were too different from him to have complex interactions with, save for crushing them for bothering him too much. This bare wasteland bored the Genome and he complained that he'd rather stay on Terra having mindless conversations with his fellow siblings.

Garland advised him to check on the more sentient creatures instead. Eventually, Kuja visited scarce flourishing forests with bigger trees, bushes and grasses. He was shocked to find more creatures roaming around, mostly small mammals, birds, reptiles and a bigger variety of insects. Most of them would run away at the sight of the Genome. However, there were few creatures that would rather not go on without a fight, and Kuja soon realized they were monsters and predators on the same level as the aggressive ones on Terra. Having practiced his magic plenty of times on Terra, Kuja was able to battle most with no problem, but he'd escape the ones that were proven too difficult to fight.

Kuja thought it was wiser to observe them from distance. It was during these times the Genome discovered few noteworthy details that was unfamiliar to any sentient creatures of Terra. The animals on Gaia fought, stole and killed for survival, all for the sake of creating a family via reproduction, where they would procreate and make sure their species perpetuated another generation.

But there was a particular aspect from them that caught his attention. Mainly, it was the way the more social animals interacted to keep their bond, that invisible thread holding beings together. From what

Kuja had read in the Terran books, the animals of the same species were exhibiting affection by cuddling each other with their muzzles brushing on the others softly. It seemed to grant them warmth and joy with a lasting friendship, and that concept of having friends and a loving family was something new to Kuja.

Garland was the only one he had once thought of being a family, and Kuja realized that he had never shown affection to him before. Perhaps this was why Garland shooed him away. Thinking he understood the concept, the next time he came back to Terra to let his master know of his findings, Kuja did something unexpected.

He laid his hands on Master Garland before he brushed his face on his chest.

For few seconds, Kuja experienced that warmth and joy he had seen from the creatures on Gaia. The young man remained like this, glad to be alive and enjoy this blessing moment until bigger hands grabbed him to the shoulders and threw him away. Kuja went straight to the ground where he sustained few wounds. Whining with pain, the Genome looked up to see his master telling him to never do this again.

Garland still hated him. Kuja felt alone.

He did not understand why he was so lonely and unloved, but his hatred for the old man started to rise from now on.

Desperate for affection, Kuja went to hug the other Genomes to see if he could somehow wake a hidden soul out of them. Of course, none of the Genomes had given him a proper reaction but standing there doing nothing, staring at him with their usual vacant eyes. He tried going after the Moogles, the only other living sentient beings of Terra, but just like Garland, they would shove him away for being Garland's underling. The monsters were out of question, but what remained were the Silver Dragons that the nursing Genomes were taking care of.

However, he made the mistake of going after a grown adolescent dragon. Trying to stroke its mane, the dragon clawed him with its gigantic leg, bringing him to unconsciousness. If it was not for Garland's fast action, Kuja would have become a corpse.

Watching as Garland was tending to his injuries had momently given Kuja hope that his master cared for him, that he was doing this out of love and friendship, just like these parents and children

animals he’d seen on Gaia. However, Kuja realized there was no love, because Garland made it clear that he helped him survive for the sole reason of needing him to proceed with his goal to fusion Terra and Gaia, and nothing more.

Kuja was swamped by sadness, and then madness which he tried to tame, fearing to disappoint his master.

It was not long after that Kuja returned to Gaia to observe more creatures on Gaia. One day, he discovered some odd but fascinating structures above a valley with small dark creatures residing in the constructed buildings. What were more shocking were the particular details that made these creatures more sentient than anything he had seen so far on Gaia.

They spoke the same language as him.

Not only that, they reasoned, they wore clothes, they stood on two feet and they greeted each other a lot.

Unlike him and his Genome kind, these creatures were smaller and stubbier, bearing dark, green-ish skin tones and they possessed no tail. While they were speaking his language, their dialect was

completely different from his. When he could say he spoke with more refined words, these sentient creatures deformed words to the point Kuja could not recognize most of them. Their very lively ways of approaching him and their strange speech scared Kuja away, now wishing he never had to contact them again.

Kuja might be a rebel teenager in his depth, but Garland concluded he was still a scared child who barely had any experience with social skills and life. The old man noted this as another failure, but he could not renounce on his angel yet.

Later, Kuja was told the friendly creatures he met were called the Dwarves. Despite their strange nature and odd behaviors, Garland told him they were part of the sentient, intelligent specimens of Gaia. Like the more social wild animals, the Dwarves lived in harmony in one group, all gathered in a same area with erect buildings and structures they called a town, a village or a city. His fear of them subduing, Kuja began to observe them from afar to see how they acted and how they fared. Unfortunately for him, the Dwarves always found him spying on them, unaware of being the subjects of his observations. Whenever they spotted him, Kuja ran away and they were starting to call him the

Frightened Ghost due to his overall pale complexion.

Yet, his observations on the Dwarves brought some lights to his notes.

When the Gaian animals would keep their bonds with gentle touches and contacts, the Dwarves would maintain their friendships with words, keeping their physical contacts as low as possible. At first, this had surprised Kuja, grasping that he might have been wrong about trying to cuddle with Garland earlier. He also noted that the Dwarves would go wild with the contacts mostly for reproduction purposes. The parents and children would proceed with hugs, noses poking and sometimes kisses to the cheek, but nothing more.

Perhaps that was one of the main things that differed them from the other animals. Were all sentient and intelligent creatures behaving like the Dwarves too?

Because they posed no threat to Garland’s plan, the old man advised Kuja to leave them for now. However, Garland knew Kuja had to be more careful with the other sentient creatures, and among them, one species called Humans which ruled over Gaia as the main race. They were told to look like a normal

Genome, but with a broadened variety of physical features that differentiated each of them, making each human unique. They sported different skin, hair and eyes colors with completely different body builds. Another way to differentiate a Human from a Genome was their lack of a tail.

Because they were supposed to look like him, Kuja became intrigued about meeting these Humans.

It was after observing the life on Gaia that Kuja truly began to hate Garland to the point he found himself utterly disgusted for having once seen him as a loving parental figure. It was an old time he wished he could forget and throw away in the deepest abyss of the void. If the Terran technology would allow him to suppress some unwanted memories, this was one he wished he could trash out of his mind. This hatred shaped his heart, his core, into a soul that hated everyone, and especially the Genomes for never acting whenever Garland hurt him. The mean old man had begun to use some physical attacks to tame his angel, thus forcing Kuja's life purpose into him. These violent interactions might allow his soulless kin to welcome the Terran souls quicker, and this intensified Kuja's

hatred for them. He had been brought to life for that sole reason to save them.

He hated everything with a burning passion. Yet, he loved being alive.

Things had gotten especially worse when Kuja first learned the concept of freedom, when beings were free without an authority to watch over them. All animals were free to do whatever they wanted to survive, without the need to do the biddings for anyone else. These wild animals looked happy to go about their businesses, and Kuja wished for that same happiness to himself. He wanted to be free like these Gaians, to be different from his Terran kin. If he couldn't get the love he coveted, the least he should have was freedom. He couldn't even say that exploring Gaia alone was a form of freedom itself when he was aware Garland kept monitoring him on regular basis using their war airship, the Invincible.

Kuja hated that he was created for the sole purpose to start a war, a war that he didn't want or understand.

He wanted a free life of his own.

When Kuja was about four years old, he thought to be old enough to ask Garland the impossible

question.

“Master Garland. Can I be free?”

The question brought a long silence from the old man, and Kuja was infuriated. He wanted an answer now, and Garland certainly wasn’t ready to answer his pleas. Kuja went as far as pulling the old man’s cape, hoping it will gain his master’s concern, but the old man was not flinching. He did not want to flinch. He was purposely ignoring his angel, Kuja knew this. Desperate, the young Genome was about to cast Fire on him until an answer was finally given.

“No.”

What a blunt answer, but at least he got one. Not the one he wanted, yet the one he expected. Furious, he asked the same question again, only to get the same short answer. Garland was not ready to free him, especially after having spent years to create him for one purpose. “If I cannot be free, then why did you give me a free will?!” Kuja shouted after Garland. “Is it to make my life insufferable?!”

Yet, the brutal slap he got after the question was unexpected. As Kuja tended to his bleeding mouth after the painful strike on his cheek with a small

Cure spell, Garland turned his back away from him, openly calling him a failure.

When Kuja left him, Garland sighed. Letting this failed prototype wandering around had its downside, but he realized that having granted him a free will and creating him an adult from the start made Kuja's taming a difficult task. He had to find another way to make him more compliant to his will, but ridding him of his soul was not the right answer. He'd be just like the other soulless Genomes, with no true powers than his current weak magic.

Still, Kuja's progresses were outstanding for one that should have been a failure. Garland almost regretted having programmed him with a shorter lifespan of twenty-four years, a fact that he thought was wiser to keep for himself.

Somehow, from the first time Garland had called him a failed prototype, Kuja's skills growth went better and faster than he had envisioned. Kuja knew the concept of the cycle of souls and everything related, and he now had a better understanding why a war was needed and why he had to develop himself to be able to manipulate individuals at will. Garland forced him to meet Soulcage, the Soul Divider, in the depth of the Iifa Tree, to understand

where souls came from and where they should go after death, thus nourishing the planet's core with memories of the departed. Garland was now certain that with the assets Kuja had attained, he now could trust his creation will create that war on an unimaginable scale in time.

For this, Kuja, alone, must explore the edges of the continent and find more civilizations.

Still, Kuja's disobediences had no limits, and to remedy this, Garland decided to reprimand his creation to force compliance back at him, the next time he will act like a brat. Garland knew physical attacks were not enough and it was soon time to strike down the man-child with fear instead. Fear will reduce his Genome into a weakened state of mind where he will be easier to mold into a compliant servant. It was either obey, being beaten until unconsciousness occurred or worse, having his soul claimed back. At first, when Garland revealed the grave consequences of his next disobedience actions, Kuja feared to lose all he possessed. Having a soul and a life on Terra was a rather unique privilege, and now Kuja knew he'd lose both if he disobeyed the master who held absolute power over him when needed.

But rules were made to be broken.

When Kuja acquired enough knowledges of more powerful magics, Kuja defied Garland by sending Fira and Blizzara spells at him, trusting to have the higher grounds. Unfortunately, a puny four years semblance of life was not enough to defeat five thousand years of experiences. It was already a lost competition to the poor silver-haired Genome. He might have been gifted with an extraordinary potential for magic and a bigger potential than normal others, but four years were not enough to forge his magic. After Kuja's meager attacks, Garland not only rebutted with a much more devastating magical attack called Flare, but he also proceeded to cast a Sleeping spell conceived to tame unfortunate Genomes courageous enough to fight the old man. Of course, for three thousand years since the creation of the first Genome, only Kuja had achieved such a precarious act of defiance, and that came with serious consequences.

When Kuja regained consciousness, he found himself in a completely dark room with no light, no door and no sounds beside his own breathing and his heartbeat. It was his first time enclosed in such room, and he didn't know where he was. Surely

somewhere in Bran Bal, and knowing his master, he suspected Garland to be behind his confinement.

Well, too bad. Regardless, Kuja had always loved the silence and peace when needed. It was in these times he enjoyed being alone to read and learn about science and magic. As the room was in complete darkness, Kuja began to ignite a Fire spell to bring light.

… Except he realized that he couldn't cast any spell at all. Was there an anti-magic field around?

Well then, he'll have to find the door by himself in this dark room. After getting on his feet, using his hands, he scrutinized the surrounding… only to discover that the room was a very small one with no visible door handle anywhere. His head even touched the ceiling, forcing him into a bending position.

The young man gave away a sigh. Confining him in a tight, wholly dark room wasn't going to make him flinch. The least he wanted was to concede in front of the old man. Surrendering would confirm that Kuja was indeed the failure Garland kept reminding him. The old man certainly did not deserve the benefit of being right!

Kuja sat down, finding a comfort zone and pose, trying to think of pleasant thoughts; the beauty of Gaia's wild life, the freedom of wild animals, the happy Dwarves, the sounds of the chanting insects, the noises… his heartbeat, his breathing… Wait, no… The sounds of the breeze, his heartbeat, his breathing… the flow of the blood in his veins…

It was getting harder to think of something else. The noises of his own body and the strange constant buzz ringing inside his ears began to take over everything. He started speaking to himself like he was having a conversation with someone else. He wasn't certain of what to discuss, but the sounds of his heartbeat began to be louder than everything. And soon, the sweat on his face streamed across his forehead as his breath, louder and more erratic, accelerated out of panic.

Now, he could not take his focus away from the pang in his heart that rattled in his chest like he was being punched from the inside. He hadn't counted the minutes, but he surely hadn't even spent an hour in the room.

It didn't take long before despair and fear overcame. His mind refused to succumb to defeat, but his body began moving on his own as he went to

bang himself on the invisible walls, crying Garland's name and begging him to let him out. "G-Garland! Master Garland…! L-Let me out, p-please!"

When Garland finally let him out, he asked Kuja if he was going to defy him again. As expected, the answer he was given was the most unclear of all.

"I don't know."

Nonetheless, Kuja had been put in that absolute isolation room more than once, each time always longer than the previous confinement. However, after each time, Kuja hardened his mind, spending his time in this room to plan the most twisted ways on how he will bring demise to his malevolent master. If only he could shut him before dismembering his robotic limbs… No, better leave the man conscious and be aware of all the magnificent torturing manners he will put him through. How about leaving his body under a crushing machine, enough to prevent him from moving, before clawing his eyes out of his orbits? Oh yes, he will enjoy these cathartic pleasures to watch Garland suffer. He would dream of this, and then, when Garland will be gone, it was time to take on his Genome kin for being the main cause of his own demise, sadness and madness. These soulless

siblings… no, not siblings, just “things”… They did not deserve anything from him.

He’ll rule over them, just as Garland ruled over them… and him. And then, when he’ll be done with them, he’ll rule over Gaia. Both worlds will be his, and his alone.

With the gaining knowledge and growth of mind, Kuja hated Garland and the Genomes with a burning passion. However, he had to wait before making a wild move. Garland’s powers were beyond his reach, and until he became stronger than him, he will not confront him to his ultimate demise.

Yes, he’ll get his revenge, and then, he will finally find his happiness.

After years of exploring the Outer Continent, after reaching his seventh year of life, Kuja had finally found what he sought for.

Creatures walking on their two legs, all gathered in a town beyond the Dwarves’ town in size and population. He could count thousands of them in one settling, walking around with their own kin and with some tame animals and monsters. Just as Garland

had told him, they sported different physical features, making them easier to tell apart. Black, brown, blond or purple hair, blue, brown or green eyes. Adults were around his height, some taller, some smaller. The younger folks full of energy were smaller with skin as smooth as his, with some bearing darker or lighter skin color. They were walking and running around, speaking and socializing with each other like a huge family. They were one of the sentient civilizations roaming on Gaia, similar to the ones he had been taught of the ancient Terrans before their planet's decay. The way they interacted fascinated him. It was nothing like the mindless, literal conversations he held with his fellow Genomes.

These creatures were Humans.

Kuja was told Humans looked very much like Genomes without a tail, but there was a peculiar detail that Garland had never mentioned about Humans before.

These Humans bore a horn on their forehead.

When he asked Garland about this, the old man remained perplexed for a moment. Garland knew the human species exhibited a large amount of diversities, but he had never seen one with a horn.

Perhaps they were simply another race of Humans, he told Kuja.

But unlike the Dwarves, Humans had one feature that was largely more noticeable on them whenever they were of happier mood. These Humans curled up their lips, and when happier, they would often let out these odd, repetitive sounds deep from their throats.

Garland told him they were smiling and laughing.

Of course, he had heard the Dwarves laugh like this, but… smile? That facial expression was a new concept to him. None of the Genome in Bran Bal had ever smiled, and with the hardened face on the Dwarves, smiles from them must have gone unnoticed by Kuja. Garland had never smiled either, and neither Kuja had. Why would he? Smiling was associated with happiness, and Kuja wasn't even sure if he had been happy in his life once.

Smiling and being happy… sounded so pleasant.

Alone in his room in Bran Bal, Kuja stared at himself before a mirror. For a long minute, he studied the features of what made up his face; his blue eyes, his silver brows, his long, silky and feathered silver hair, his refined nose, his smooth

cheeks and his small lips. Using his fingers, he gently brushed his cheeks, his brows, his nose and finally his lips.

Then he curled his lips up.

… Strange, he didn’t look any happier, but the move gave him a small pain to the cheeks. Smiling was so new to him he wasn’t sure if he did it correctly, but he was certain the smile before him wasn’t looking natural.

That false smile brought more sadness to him.

…

Despite his curiosity on Humans, Garland warned him to not get too close to them right away because they were dangerous creatures. While the Dwarves of Conde Petie were tranquil and mostly pacifist, the Humans were unpredictable beings. They might be hostile to strangers that did not bear the same overall appearances as them, making Kuja’s tail and his lack of horn a problem. Following Garland’s advice, unlike the way he met the Dwarves, Kuja spied on the Humans, always wearing a long cloak with a hoodie to hide his furred appendage and his forehead.

Thankfully, no Humans took notice of Kuja's presence among them. To them, he passed as another random individual from their peers. They paid no heed to his presence, as long as he didn't make any contact with them. To make sure he was never noticed, he avoided the crowded places.

After months of spying, he still wasn't sure how to start a war. Was he missing something?

Kuja made a shocking discovery about them, one day, when he spied after two Humans exploring a nearby wood. One of the men was being attacked by a wild Griffin. His companion was overwhelmed by a surge of fear and panic, and taken by a spur of courage, he unsheathed his sword and rushed to the monster. After sustaining few hits by the creature, the courageous man screamed and ran after it, this time with a glowing body like a sudden energy bursting out of him, manifested by a strange light. What happened next went so fast Kuja had a hard time focusing when the Human was finally able to defeat the Griffin in mere seconds and save his friend from death.

As with all discoveries, Kuja reported it to Garland, speaking of the glowing Human as this was probably a fact of interest. After all, the Human had

appeared much stronger and faster during that short period, which could be a convenient aspect from the Humans. Upon learning about it, Garland went to shut himself in the ancient Terran archives, allowing no one to bother him. This brought relief upon Kuja who was freed from his master's attention for a week.

Yet, old instincts were hard to kill off.

After a week, Kuja intruded himself in the library, anxious of his master's lack of presence when the Genomes revealed that Garland still had not exited the room since he first entered. When he opened the door to the room, he gazed at Garland who had been busy listening and watching a three-dimensional hologram of an ancient Terran speaking of gibberish Kuja did not understand.

"Hmm, yes, the way to make a perfect Genome with a soul," Garland whispered to himself, keeping on listening to the projected moving image. Taken aback by the comment, Kuja frowned at him. "How did this simple fact slip from me? I should have taken this in consideration when I conceived him, seven years ago."

The old man rarely spoke his thoughts out loud, so this had taken Kuja by surprise. At the very least,

Kuja was aware he was the subject of this monologue, but he did not understand why. “What are you talking about?” he asked his master.

“It is none of your concern,” Garland said without ever turning to his creation, irritated by his presence. “I advise you to return to your magic books, or better, return to Gaia. Go and learn about the Humans.”

Infuriated, Kuja shut the door to the old man, leaving him into whatever dreams he was alluding.

A dream that might come true, thanks to that leak about the glowing Human Kuja brought up a week earlier. It sparked an old memory in the depth of Garland’s knowledge, something he had forgotten after millenniums of existence. After researching in the Terran archives, he rediscovered the power of Trance, a power that each individual with a soul was granted with, let it be a Terran, a Gaian or any inhabitant of a planet with souls and sentience. The way to awaken that hidden power was to provoke a surge of complex emotions like the ultimate wish to protect someone from death, just as with that glowing Human Kuja had witnessed.

But to achieve such a high level of emotive outbursts, one needed to develop complex emotions.

Only now, Garland realized his true mistake when conceiving Kuja. Because he was artificially created as an adult, Kuja had never experienced the childhood needed to develop these emotions, thus giving him no possible way to use Trance. As a matter of fact, creating Kuja as an adult made it impossible for Garland to fully mold him into absolute compliance and obedience either.

To make the perfect Angel of Death, he will need to create another Genome with a soul, and this one will not start a life as an adult. It will be an infant, one set to grow normally as if born from one male and one female progenitors. Not only this will allow it to develop the complex emotions needed to ascend Trance, but it will be uncorrupted from the beginning with a blank state, making it a very malleable angel. Yes, the next angel will become perfection after years, years that were nothing for an old man who had lived for five thousand years. Even having Terra's decaying crystal in mind, Garland knew the crystal will last few more hundred years, and that was plenty to set his plan into motion.

Creating another Genome with a soul and with a unique appearance like Kuja will take years, however. Even with the given time, he still wished to see Terra's revival soon to meet his creators again.

Yet, if he'd use the same genetic setup of a normal Genome and give it a soul with a different program input into its mind, then…

Yes, this might work. Years of conceptions and forging a unique living creature will be reduced in short months.

"Master Garland, a Genome told me you have something for me."

When Kuja came in the basement in the laboratory room, he hadn't expected so many Genomes standing around taking notes around their much taller master. As all stood around one of these pods where all Genomes had found life, Kuja was curious on what kind of brethren was floating in the tank. He tried taking a peek, and yet he couldn't see anything but the bubbles coming from the bottom and the cables from above that were attached to the living thing inside the tank. Garland turned around to see his servant waiting for him to say a word. The expression Garland bore on his face evoked an odd confidence that Kuja had never seen during his eight years of life.

Looking back at the angel, the old man spoke, “Ah, Kuja, you are here. Have you learned more about the Gaians?”

“Spare me of your questions,” Kuja retorted, the brows on his face hardening. He knew his master and his underlings were hiding something and he no longer wanted to be part of the oblivious ones. “What do you have for me?”

“You will see soon enough,” Garland responded with an unnatural certainty. Rising his voice at the others, he ordered, “My fellow Genomes. Step aside and let Kuja see him.”

… *Him*?

“Who’s him?” Kuja asked, widening his stare at the tank as the Genomes left a path to the pod for him. When he discovered the creature inside it, silence befell on him.

Inside the transparent pod, a small male Genome bathed in the light blue fluid, the cables from above planted under the skin of his limbs and his long umbilical cord to his stomach sustaining him. His flowing long blond hair and his tail danced with the flow of the bubbles like a ghostly, soaring spirit. His two hands formed into tiny fists positioned close to

his mouth, as if sucking a thumb like a young infant. His small, round head rested near his knees, putting his small, frail body into a fetal position.

Yet, despite the same blond hair and tail that made up all his siblings' appearance, this Genome looked much, much younger than all the others. Garland had only created Genomes with a fixated appearance to never grow older during their immortal life until given a soul, from an older child to a young adult. However, this was the first time a Genome was created this young. There was something Kuja was unable to explain that was drawing him toward the slumbering minuscule Genome, like a magnet gently forcing him to put his palms on the tank glass.

When he touched the glass, something drove him to step back in shock.

The little Genome opened his eyelids, revealing wide aquamarine eyes shining with a longing light, the same privileged light Kuja possessed. For a long, quiet minute, they gazed at each other, unable to leave their sight from the other.

This Genome child… no, not a child. An infant, that baby Genome… Did he truly have… a soul, too?

“Kuja,” Garland called his servant, maintaining his authoritarian tone. “Meet the next Angel of Death, Zidane.”

Author’s note*: According to the FF wikia, Kuja means the planet Mars in the Hindu cosmogony, and Mars is the name of the Roman God of War.*

The dark room punishment concept is inspired by several articles I’ve read and documentaries I’ve watched about experiments of people living in the darkness alone and these completely soundproof rooms where people won’t stay long inside.

I originally planned 8 pages for this chapter, but it’s 16 pages now… Is this too long? :(

Chapter 2: Smile

YES, the part I wanted to write. Also thanks again to Guest for the review! I am no longer afraid of posting long chapters, lol!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 2: Smile

"Kuja. Meet the next Angel of Death, Zidane."

This could not be true. He did not believe this would happen so soon. This was not right! Startled for another instant, he regained grasp of himself, taking few slow steps backward with eyes wide and mouth agape. He shook his head in confusion as thousands of questions crossed his mind, not expecting to get any answer. He looked back in the tank, narrowing his brows with fear only to find out that the baby Genome was still staring at him with broad pure eyes bursting with a sparkling curiosity and innocence. The infant was drawn to him like their souls were the magnets of life.

It was so odd, to call this infant an Angel of Death when it looked so puny, weak and even

somehow unappealing, having the look and genetic setup of all his soulless siblings. That thing probably had no concept of death itself. However, having labelled this infant as an Angel right before he was even born only suggested one thing.

Zidane was meant to replace Kuja.

How… How will a baby even replace him? Kuja did not understand. He had seen it himself. On Gaia, infants were fragile and completely helpless. They were unable to do anything by themselves, they were noisy and annoying and they demanded and required care all the time. It was the very reason Garland had created the Genomes no younger than an old child! Making a baby Genome was a mistake! How could his master not see this from the start?

It will take so long, so many years, for that Zidane, that tiny infant with a soul, to ever reach where Kuja was to this day. Such chores and wasted years!

Yet, at the same time…

For a fragment of a moment, his mind was suddenly flooded by more pleasant thoughts with the prospect of having someone else with a soul on Terra, his own kin, to interact with. Zidane was

going to be someone like him, one who will hold more than literal scientific and magic facts unlike the other Genomes. If everything went well, perhaps they will speak of anything and everything together, thus Zidane will become a new companion to Kuja.

Then he would not be alone anymore…

No, no… Garland truly destined Zidane as a replacement for Kuja, this was so obvious! The old man had no guilt to call him a failure at everything, despite his numerous successes. By becoming Kuja's replacement, Garland will reclaim his soul, the very core that made him the individual he was. His memories, his experiences, his knowledge, all acquired for naught. This was a parody of life, a death worse than any type of physical torture.

Hence why, despite having regained his composure, Kuja's sudden fear of what the future will yield for him was visible to the old man, thanks to his shaking tail giving him away.

No, he will not be replaced. Kuja held onto his life, and he will not let a puny, harmless angel take his place! He had to plan something to get rid of Zidane and fast before the years will progress and shape the infant into a powerful creature…

“I know what you are thinking,” Garland said behind him, startling the silver-haired Genome. “It is wiser for you to not dispose of Zidane, for then I will claim your soul and make you a mere puppet like the others.”

Dammit. Kuja might hate the old man, but Garland knew him too much. After all, he was his creator, his… father. How the simple concept of having thought of him as a father once disgusted him. Right. Kuja did fear to lose his soul, the most precious thing a living being could hold on to, especially on this bare, ugly planet. Even if Garland did not hold control over his mind, he still possessed the absolute power over his life. Taking away his soul was one of the assets he could remove from him as naturally as breathing air.

It was so maddening to live in this sad fear with no way out.

“Kuja, you are to nurse this infant. You will raise him. You will shape him into the perfect Angel of Death with your knowledge.”

Yet, something was amiss.

If Kuja, and not Garland, will have to bear the responsibilities of nursing, then why was Zidane

created as a harmless infant? He had seen it on Gaia! Infants required observation and care all the time! Adult Humans and adult Dwarves would devote all their times just to keep these things alive! Why did Garland want a baby Genome? How will a baby ever become a fearless Angel of Death?

And how will Kuja even find the time to explore Gaia as Garland wanted while taking care of Zidane? How will he do all of these tasks by himself?

“Master Garland, I… I don’t understand…”

“You do not have to understand anything,” Garland responded. The tone of his comment left Kuja the feeling of being grounded. “I have summoned you here because you are the only one suitable to take care of Zidane.”

The lack of a clear reasoning was becoming more infuriating for the silver-haired Genome. Hands turning into fists, like an angry young adolescent, Kuja hollered, “Why is he an infant?! Why don’t you take care of him yourself? I don’t have time for children!”

“Silence!” Garland’s blaring, deep voice echoed through Bran Bal, sending shivers down Kuja’s tail.

“Kuja, you are in no position to question your new task. You will raise Zidane. I have created him as such, and that was my decision alone. His anatomy and functionality of a one-year-old infant will make your raising task easier. He will accompany you all the time and he will learn everything from you. Zidane will grow up like a normal Gaian infant until his growth will be slightly slowed down in his late childhood. Experiencing a life with a soul from this age will allow him plenty of time to develop emotional growth over the next years.”

Kuja shook his head again. Garland’s last sentence brought more confusion. This was getting weirder and more frustrating, knowing that most of his questions will never get any concrete answers. “What? What about emotions?” he asked, his last word sounding exasperate.

“Why bother?” the old android man uttered, turning around and leaving the silver-haired angel to his fate, with the rest of the soulless Genomes following their master. “You will see for yourself why this Angel of Death is superior to you.”

Left alone with the infant floating in the glass pod, Kuja remained still and glared at his master walking away and not even having the slightest

concern for his servant. After all, why caring for a failure? Failures were to be discarded.

Wait a minute. Garland had forced Kuja the new task of becoming this baby Genome's caregiver. An infant will take years to grow, perhaps one day, into a fine lad. This aspect alone signified that Garland was not ready to take Kuja's soul away or dispose him anytime soon. This will allow him to live on for years, or at least until Zidane will be good enough on his own in a long, long time for someone like Kuja.

The frustration of his controlled life suddenly subdued when he left a long sigh of relief. Dying or becoming an empty vessel was the least of his worries now. This granted him more time to set his eventual plan to overthrow Garland one of these days. Only then, he will be freed from his master's grip, and maybe he will get to rule over the others. Oh, how he will be overcome with joy and satisfaction to gain superiority over the old man he despised so much!

And if everything went well, he might even set his precious angel Zidane against that despicable android.

Speaking of the devil, that Zidane… Kuja was not certain what to expect with having an infant under his wing. He had no actual experience into caring for anything and even less a baby. All the knowledge he had acquired through his life were by observing animals, Humans and Dwarves sustaining their children. He never got to hold or touch one. Will he even be able to handle one child for the upcoming years? Anyhow, several years were not so short for an eight-year-old like him.

A one-year-old baby should know few things too, Kuja thought. They should be capable of few cognitive responses and some basic interactions. This was enough for Kuja to be confident of his own skills. Years of spying on Gaians were certainly not for naught. The next years with this infant won't be so bad. It was better than being discarded in a way or another.

From afar, Garland ordered the Genome at the control stand to free the special baby from his glass cage. After the Genome complied with the order, the fluid in the tank dissolved. At the same time, the cables on the limbs and the umbilical cord detached automatically from the tiny body, with the infant reaching the bottom of the cage in an odd pose, his face and belly upward. Finally, when the glass rose

to the ceiling, pushing Zidane to his life, his legs and arms kicked and hanged skyward like he was trying to reach higher grounds. After rolling around on his bare body, he managed to get on a sitting position, his wide gaze back at the silver-haired Genome who gulped in discomfort.

The awkward staring session lasted for a minute.

Thankfully, Zidane soon lost interest of the older Genome and decided to focus on his newly discovered furred appendage. He gazed at it with a shining curiosity and then the tip of his tail moved up and down slowly, as if the baby realized the extended limb was his and he was learning how to control it. He caught it with his clumsy and tiny fingers and fiddled with its fur coat. The sensation tickled him, and he broke into a giggle with a big smile.

A smile…

How was this possible? The harmless infant was already smiling into this world when he barely knew anything of his surroundings or even his life purpose. Despite having been designed to be a fearful Angel of Death, Zidane was the very image of innocence.

For now…

“Hey,” Kuja called the baby boy, but Zidane did not take notice of his call, still busy watching his tail moving, smiling and uttering joyful moans by catching and releasing his appendage. “I don’t get what’s so funny. We all have a tail. Why are you laughing at it?”

When Zidane still did not react to Kuja’s comment, the young man sighed, realizing that a baby such as him had an awful attention span. Decided to test something, Kuja sat beside the infant, bringing his own tail closer to Zidane, this time getting his attention. Like he was being hypnotized by the silver tail, whenever Kuja moved his tail, Zidane’s eyes trailed after it. Once again, the baby smiled and caught the tip of Kuja’s tail, moving it up and down before he giggled. If it took that for a baby to enjoy life, Kuja somehow wished he could have been a baby too, once upon a time.

Keeping his distance from his two angels, Garland observed them interacting. The confusion on Kuja was to be expected. After all, his main role to this great purpose of causing a world war had suddenly shifted to become an infant’s caregiver instead. However, Garland was more relieved to see

how Zidane began his life and how his reaction with Kuja went. While Zidane's start went very similarly as Kuja's beginning, Zidane's ways felt more natural. This was the normal process for a newborn infant of one year old to be curious like this.

It was the sign of possessing a pure soul.

If everything will go as planned, they should soon see each other as siblings.

Eventually, Zidane grew bored of Kuja's tail. After he freed his tail, he released a long yawn, his wide mouth revealing few tiny teeth. With so few teeth, it will be difficult to determine what kind of food the baby must be sustained with. Now wishing to explore more of his unknown new world, Zidane stretched out his arms and body toward Garland and the other Genomes that were moving away from him. The stretch went too far and the baby awkwardly hit the ground. Thankfully, the incident didn't seem to hurt the infant as he immediately got back on his rear in a sitting position.

The way he moved suggested Zidane was unable to walk or run properly. Unfortunately, this was an inconvenient feature for babies. Seeing that only the silver-haired Genome was close to him, the first individual he had ever latched his sight at, Zidane

felt safer to stretch his arms at him, coveting Kuja's presence.

Zidane smiled at Kuja again.

… Why was Kuja suddenly feeling warm?

"Take a good care of Zidane," Garland reminded Kuja before he retreated from the laboratory with the other Genomes. "You know the consequences if you are to disobey me. Do not disappoint me."

Kuja shuddered at the order. Whenever Garland would remind him of his fate as a slave of Terra, he'd wince with anger. *Yes, I know,* he thought to himself. *How many times will you have to repeat that? You will dispose of my soul, and I'll just be like the others.*

"But I'm different! I'm not like the others!" he said out loud, with only Zidane to actually listen to his complaint. This was so strange for the infant to pay attention to him and to the way he spoke. Kuja began to focus on the baby on the ground who still had his puppy stare at him. "Even you, Zidane, have the same blond hair and tail like the others! I'm more unique than you'll ever be, watch me!"

However, when he expected the baby to be terrorized by his remark, Zidane kept his wide gaze

at him before he began to smile broad and laugh again. Outraged, Kuja exclaimed, “What? What’s so funny? Why are you even laughing? There is nothing funny about being like the others!”

Perhaps Kuja still could not understand infants very well…

After he was done with his laughs, Zidane extended his arms toward Kuja again like he was begging his older kin to take him. The sadder expression on his face hinted his need for warmth and transportation. Giving in another sigh, Kuja crouched over the infant and placed him in his arms, trying to imitate the human and dwarf parents he had seen on Gaia. Satisfied, Zidane left his limbs heavy and rested his head on Kuja’s shoulder. The baby must be exhausted from exploring this world for the first time in his life, after all.

The warmth from having the infant against his shoulder and chest gave an odd rush through Kuja’s body.

Kuja did not understand why, but he felt relief and calm with the baby resting on him.

When he exited the laboratory with the baby in his arms, none of the Genomes in Bran Bal paid any

heed to him and their new angel. Walking around and trying to discuss of things with Zidane, Kuja began to search for a cloth to cover the baby's naked body from the cold of this dead town. Before Kuja even reached his meager home, he found out that Zidane had already surrendered his consciousness on his shoulder, now deep in sleep. Kuja experienced the slow movement of the infant's warm breathing on his chest.

Perhaps Kuja's arms were enough to provide him the warmth needed for sleep.

… Somehow, he felt good about it.

Without thinking, Kuja covered the baby with a cloth he found in his room, careful to not wake him up. With it, Zidane's breathing had gotten slower but mild, like the baby was enjoying being protected from the cold with both the cloth and Kuja's arms. From the depth of his knowledge, Kuja knew this was the right thing to do to protect this infant.

The first day with Zidane added to his duty and life, with everything having gone smoothly, Kuja began to feel like a guardian.

All thanks to his knowledge and the hologram he discovered in the archive explaining how to feed a mammal infant without breastfeeding, Kuja borrowed a bottle from the Silver Dragon hatchlings caretakers. On the top of the bottle, a rubber material looking like a mammal nipple was conveniently shaped to feed the hatchlings, but Kuja thought this might work well on Genome infants. When Zidane woke up from his long slumber in Kuja's arms, instinctively, he lightly opened his lips and positioned them close to Kuja's chest, trying to catch his nipple. Startled by the move, Kuja bounced, shocking Zidane. However, when the silver-haired Genome introduced him the bottle with the rubber cup and the feeding formula inside, the infant stretched his hands toward the bottle, his eyes now beaming with fascination.

When Kuja gently placed the baby in his arm and used the other arm to slowly push the bottle to him, Zidane gripped the bottle with his tiny hands and put the cup to his mouth, sucking the formula. His eyes facing up, the baby tranquilly fed on the bottle content while giving a long and wide stare at Kuja. Feeling awkward, Kuja turned his face away from him, blushing from the innocent, intense gaze.

It was during the feeding moment that Zidane began to use a free hand, his feet and his tail to brush himself against Kuja's body and face.

At first, Kuja felt uneasy, shocked by the touch and almost afraid of it. The only touches he had gotten from anyone on Terra so far were Garland's violent slaps and strikes, and that was without even counting the near deadly attack from an adolescent Silver Dragon. For once, another Genome touched him, but the touches were tender and friendly as if Zidane enjoyed touching his caregiver.

Just like Gaian parents and children cuddling and giving affectionate pats and brushes.

Some of the most warming moves from Gaians were the strokes on the head, the nose-to-nose pokes and the hugs. Once in his early life, Kuja had tried these moves on Genomes who had not responded to his physical contacts and on Garland who had replied with a painful slap to his body. Desperate for a friend, Kuja had simply given up at one point.

But Zidane did not need Kuja to start cuddling to offer him the touch. He was already responding with some affectionate moves. Were these the natural way of an infant?

When Zidane finished his bottle, Kuja attempted something. Pulling the infant closer to him, Kuja used his own nose to mildly poke Zidane's nose.

Zidane smiled wide.

The baby went as far as reaching out to his caregiver by using his two hands to caress his cheeks with his smile still on-going. Kuja couldn't believe that Zidane was actually responding with more fond moves, and most of all, the baby appeared even happier from it.

Happiness…

Another warmth rushed through Kuja. This was so strange, so odd. He had never experienced this feeling before, but surprisingly, he was relaxed by it.

Kuja brushed Zidane's cheeks with his fingers, and Zidane responded with a pat on his much bigger hand. When Kuja gave him a hug, Zidane attempted to wrap his small arms around him, but of course, he could not. Instead, the young infant did it with his tail.

Were these… love and friendship?

Garland did call Zidane his sibling, just like the other Genomes. However, Zidane was anything but

like his soulless brethren. He had a soul, just like Kuja, just like the sentient and self-aware Gaians. Kuja never thought to call the others his siblings and worse, calling Garland his father. To him, he had no family, no friend, no one and no place to call home.

It was so odd, to be in the presence of this tiny Genome who had been created by the old man he despised so much with a burning passion. The latest creation meant to replace him someday was making this place feel more like a cozy home.

This was so confusing, and yet, Kuja did not seem to mind much. After all, eldest *brothers* were supposed to be the more responsible ones in the family.

Right, Zidane was his younger *sibling*.

All this feeding, cuddling and gentle moves seemed to exhaust the young infant, and soon, he found slumber once again in Kuja's arms. Tired as much, Kuja went to his room, careful to lay Zidane on his bed with him before succumbing to sleep too. They both woke up at the same time later, repeating the same feeding and cuddling moments, knowing this might tighten their bonds as *brothers*.

Brothers… The significance of this word ringed pleasantly to his mind.

But like everything, their great moments together eventually had to shatter, when the filthy part began.

For an instant, Kuja felt dumb. He should have expected this the moment he realized he was to be the caregiver of an infant. He had even seen it when observing the Humans and the Dwarves on Gaia. Of course, it was the part none of them, whether they were Humans, Dwarves or a soulful Genome, truly enjoyed.

From the beginning of his creation, Kuja had been able to properly get rid of his own wastes, whether they were solid or liquid, without bothering the others. It was something Garland had programmed in all Genomes from the start to avoid a mess of fecal matters and traces of urine scattered around Bran Bal. It was the right thing to do for a proper toilet, and Kuja was especially keen on his own appearance and smell.

But Zidane was different. As an infant, nothing like this was programmed into him. Unlike Kuja and the other Genomes, Zidane could not get rid of his wastes by himself. Kuja realized that this dirty chaos was now a tormenting part of his new

responsibilities as Zidane's caregiver, at least if he wanted to keep his soul. Cleaning a baby's waste was not meant to be a pleasant task. It was a hassle.

The first time this had happened, Zidane had peed on Kuja while he was being held. Outraged and panicked, the older Genome had screamed and rushed to the clear-crystal lake in the middle of Bran Bal, cleaning himself and the baby who had begun to laugh and smile while being offered a bath. When he was done with the rushed bath, infuriated, Kuja had placed Zidane on a rock, shouting and lecturing him how wrong he had been and how to groom himself and get rid of his wastes. Of course, the baby did not understand anything, but seeing the numerous changes of facial expressions on Kuja had triggered a loud laugh out of him. However, when the baby had sensed the negativity from his caregiver, the laugh and smile were gone to allow uncontrollable cries and tears instead.

How awful and loud Zidane had become. It was annoying and insufferable!

Kuja had understood that Zidane was incapable of even comprehending his older brother's sudden outburst, but having been drenched of the baby's own urine had certainly not been the most refreshing

incident. Kuja's frustration was truly a spur of the moment reaction.

But his frustration had soon vanished when Zidane had pushed his arms toward Kuja again, wanting to be held. The silver-haired young man could no longer feel angry over this silly incident, but he was rather scared that another dirty accident was going to happen again. Thankfully, he remembered the most effective method from the Gaian Humans and Dwarves to keep the infants clean by wrapping a piece of cloth around their rear and genital parts. With these clothes, Zidane's wastes should be absorbed into one spot instead of being spread everywhere or on themselves. Zidane will need to be potty trained as well.

But this disgusting task was not his only new painful obligation.

The diaper method was only the first answer to his never-ending problems. He soon found himself with the issues of the unstoppable screaming and crying, which had begun on the infant's second day of life.

The first and second times these had happened, having to guess what a crying baby who couldn't speak needed had been proven a very difficult task

for Kuja. He was no parent and even less a very caring individual for one who had never been given love and affection before. Providing this baby the perfect care was more difficult than the Gaians made it appear.

But Gaians lived in society with many more individuals with a soul among them. When they were working together to raise a child, Kuja was completely alone in this chore and he will be for the next years.

With the first two times, Zidane had eventually stopped crying after an entire hour screaming when he had been too tired to continue. He had fallen asleep wherever he was, with Kuja being relieved. It was during Zidane's slumber after his second screaming session that the young man had decided to listen to an old hologram. He listened to it explaining that when they were not hurt or injured, infants often cried to get their most basic needs filled, whether it was to eat and drink, to get cleaned, to find a place to sleep or to get affection.

It was strange. From what he understood, these long crying sessions should mostly occur when the infants were only few months old. Zidane had been created as a one-year-old. Why was that?

Nevertheless, when the third tantrum came, Kuja attempted to follow these tips. Hugging and brushing Zidane's cheeks did not work. Cleaning him was out of the way since there was nothing in his diaper and Kuja had just given him a bath. When he gave the feeding bottle, Zidane immediately quieted himself and began to ingurgitate the content.

What a relief…

But soon, when it was time for him to sleep, Zidane began to refuse to sleep anywhere else than within Kuja's arms. Not even their bed would do unless his older brother lied down with him. Kuja could barely find any time to rest, always stuck with the care he had to provide the small infant. When he managed to get some sleep, they were always cut short by the baby crawling to him and bothering him. If Kuja would not wake up, then Zidane would go through another loud crisis.

All these negative hardships from taking care of Zidane began to have several repercussions on the older Genome, mainly exhausting him to the point he nearly passed out once by the lack of sleep. Found with no way out of this, as a desperate attempt to get help, he requested support from the Moogles, the only sentient beings with a soul on

Terra, save for him and the Silver Dragons. As expected, the Moogles fled with Kuja's presence, never wanting to help any ally of Garland.

Thus, he went to his other fellow Genomes. When Kuja realized that they did not understand his despair, he ran to the Silver Dragon hatchlings caretakers who looked at him clueless. They were tasked to take care of Silver Dragons, but baby Genomes were out of their leagues.

As a last resort, Kuja ran to Garland. However, with the presence of Garland around, Zidane began to cry.

And despite Kuja's cuddles, Zidane wasn't close to stop.

The old man saw the signs of extreme fatigue on the older angel. Oddly enough, even with the annoyed sigh he huffed, Garland decided to give it a shot. Kuja was actually shocked to see Garland agreeing to help, but it probably had to do with the fact that Zidane was more precious to him than Kuja ever was. When Garland took hold of the infant in his robotic arms, Zidane stared back at Kuja, his cries momently stopped. However, his eyes were wide with tears and his lips trembled. Ultimately, the infant extended his arms toward Kuja who could

only look at him, exasperate but feeling odd seeing the fear and sadness on the younger brother. Soon enough, Zidane cried again, trying to reach out for Kuja from Garland's arms. Annoyed by the cries and stuck without another choice, Garland merely gave Zidane back to Kuja to never help him in this parenting task, ever again.

… Still, Kuja wanted a good sleep.

Thankfully for him, he had just learned a convenient spell from the Terran books. The Sleep magic existed to defend himself against his enemies, but it should shut the baby from times to times. The idea to cast the spell on an infant seemed strange, but Kuja was getting too desperate for one single full sleep. Right now, Zidane was getting into another of these crying moments. Keeping him in his arms, he casted Sleep on him. To his surprise, the spell worked with success, where Zidane instantly appeased down before finding slumber. Kuja tried poking the baby to see if he'd wake up, but the sleep seemed to be quite deep.

Satisfied, Kuja lied down on his bed with Zidane and slept.

He woke up much later, only to find that Zidane was still asleep. This was strange. The infant would

never sleep that long. He decided to toss the thought aside and went on a stroll to Bran Bal with Zidane in his arms, waiting for him to wake up.

After long, long hours, he was still asleep, but something was amiss.

Zidane's heart pulses were getting slower.

Kuja wasn't sure if it was the prolonged sleep that was causing this. He tried waking the infant, but Zidane was not opening his eyes nor that he flinched. When he asked one of the Silver Dragon hatchlings caretakers what was happening, one gave him an answer.

"An infant creature needs constant care and feeding. A prolonged sleep will prevent the infant to get its most basic needs. Without proper care and feeding, the infant will get sick and will die."

When he got his answer, Kuja rushed to his room, trying to feed Zidane with the bottle, but he realized that in his sleeping state, Zidane was not going to grip to the sucking cup. He shook the baby, but he maintained slumber. Panicking, Kuja had no idea how he could wake Zidane up, but the infant needed the feeding. Desperate, Kuja went to Garland and told him what happened. Upon learning of the

forced Sleep spell, Garland took Zidane in his arms and then gave Kuja a powerful slap to his head, knocking him down.

The silver-haired Genome woke up in the dark room and begged Garland to let him out. He didn't understand why he was put in the room. He did nothing wrong, after all. All he wanted was a good night sleep! Eventually, Kuja fell into slumber in the room but was soon awakened when the door of the room finally let him to the outside.

Garland pulled him to the laboratory, where a still slumbering Zidane was put in a special tank with a feeding tube deep into his esophagus. The old man threw him at the tank and forced the Genome to take a look at what he had done with a single Sleep magic. The sight crept Kuja and Garland snarled at him to never cast Sleep on Zidane again. Sleep was a good way to protect himself, but Zidane was only a weak infant on who the Sleep spell had a much bigger impact. A simple Sleep magic will cause Zidane to sleep for few days, which should kill a baby. The least Garland wished was the death of his "perfect" Angel of Death.

And truthfully, Kuja did not want this either.

Well, Kuja learned his lessons. Until the infant will grow up, Kuja will be bound to exhaustion all the time. The prospect angered him.

However, days later, when Zidane woke up, Kuja was sitting beside him. The first thing Zidane did was smiling at him and coveting his warmth. After all he had done, the infant had already forgiven him.

Kuja did not understand.

But being exhausted and tired all the time was better than all the slapping, beating and the dark room. With time, Kuja decided it was wiser to get some sleep whenever Zidane fell asleep. By getting their sleep synchronized, Kuja managed to gain back some of his energy and even his sanity.

…

Over the time, the exhaustion and sleeps were part of Kuja's daily life. Yet, there were moments when he felt rewarded with everything he had accomplished with his little brother that he would forget about being tired all the time. Whenever Zidane was neither in need of toileting, eating, crying, screaming or sleeping, he would spend time cuddling his big brother. Sometimes, Zidane would be amused by pulling Kuja's long silver hair with his

two tiny hands (how his small fingers gripped to the hair so tightly was a question he no longer longed for an answer). Even if the act hurt a little, Zidane would always smile and laugh at him. It soon became a sort of game which Kuja found oddly pleasing.

Zidane always sought affection from his older brother, whether it was a physical contact or emotional exchange. Over the first month, Kuja learned to read emotional feelings that Zidane exhibited and he always knew what was needed to take a perfect care of him. In return, even though Kuja hardly showed any change in his facial expression or his overall stance, Zidane learned to appreciate his presence. He liked to touch Kuja's face and sometimes, they would brush their nose together. The move would always appease the infant, and it gave Kuja a strange, warming rush that he was not complaining about. Kuja would return few moves, mainly by petting and stroking Zidane's cheeks, hair and back. Even right now, they were having a game where they'd curl their tail around the other's, and Zidane would end by catching the silver one which he knew was not his. It was a comforting game for both.

To add, Zidane liked when Kuja talked. His smiles were always wider whenever Kuja spoke softer words and he'd laugh when the older sibling spoke casually. Zidane just adored hearing Kuja's voice.

Soon, the day had come for the infant to grow some more. After the second month of awakening into this sad world they were forced to call home, with a leading curiosity to explore his surroundings, Zidane began crawling on all fours. With the infant now capable of shifting from place to place (although slowly), Kuja felt relaxed for once. Garland had told him Zidane should learn things faster than a normal Gaian human infant, and thankfully, his predictions were right. Now, Kuja trusted that his little brother will soon have the capability to walk on his two legs.

That dastardly Garland. He might be a malevolent old man who only had eyes for his mission to save Terra, no matter the price, but to reach his goals, he had given Kuja a gift.

Love.

By creating Zidane as the second Angel of Death, he had offered Kuja the possibility to love and to be loved, something that had not been possible to him

before. The reality of being loved was the greatest event Kuja could experience in his short eight years of existence.

Together, as they sat before the lake in the middle of Bran Bal, as the other soulless Genomes passed by them without even giving them any thought, Kuja and Zidane enjoyed the view from their natural seat made of bland blue rocks. Gazing at the lake, only now Kuja realized that the Terran surrounding was not so bad. At least, Zidane adored the view and the water which he loved to play with.

When Kuja petted the infant on the head, Zidane rewarded him with a smile. That warm feeling rushed through Kuja again.

Now, he just realized the true feeling he had been experiencing during these moments for these past weeks.

“Thank you, Zidane. You brought me warmth in this sad home.”

Without ever realizing it, knowing that he was loved, a natural, warm smile crawled onto his lips for the first time in his eight years of life.

Kuja was happy.

***Author's note**: There's not enough family fluff stories with Kuja and Zidane. This chapter is one of the main reasons I wanted to write this fic.*

Also, I've been trying to give baby Zidane a more realistic means for a one-year-old infant, using my own one-year-old niece as a reference (who's almost three years old now, lol) as I don't have kids of my own. I know baby Zidane's actions to try catching Kuja's nipples with his mouth and to brush his hands and tail on Kuja's chest during feeding moments are weird, but babies do that (well, without the tail part, of course).

Chapter 3: Feral

Another of these fluff-like chapters, with a twist. Thanks again to the Guest for the review and all the Fav too!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 3: Feral

For the entire year since the awakening of Garland's most precious creature and second Angel of Death, Kuja never regretted turning into the guardian of this tiny child who had become his true little brother.

It'd been so strange, and yet so pleasant, to watch the fruit of his cares growing up to become his own individual, to earn his own core that will make him what he will be. Zidane's soul still remained uncorrupted, filled with nothing but happiness and joy of life thanks to Kuja's attention and affection. The boy knew nothing of wars, of the concepts of the planets' fusion, of the Iifa Tree or what was good and bad. His life was all he had, and that was everything that mattered for now. Even if one was to

explain him these concepts, a toddler like him was unable to grasp such complex concepts.

With that pure, innocent soul, if all was going accordingly to Kuja's plan, Zidane will become an enemy to their creator. They will team up together against the old man Kuja despised so much.

But for now, this small child remained oblivious to the world and the danger that might prey upon him. Kuja had no choice but to let Zidane live and gain experiences of life, with love, friendship, hatred and hardships.

As preprogrammed into his genetic setup, Zidane made good progresses for a child aging at a similar rate of a normal Gaian Human. After a year, he was already physically built like a two-year-old toddler, having now gained the aptitudes of walking and running on his two feet. His hands dexterity was beyond compare for a young toddler when he was able to use complex tools with them, such as a pen, a random hologram or even things that could be used as a weapon, like sharps metallic objects. Of course, Kuja always looked over him whenever Zidane was in the presence of these tools.

The child even discovered a productive use of his furred appendage, sometimes using it as a third arm.

Just to play games with his older brother, Zidane would hang up above from a random pole to hide away from everyone's sight. At first, these hide-and-seek games annoyed the young silver-haired Genome, infuriated when he could not find the child after two or three minutes of intense searches. However, within the first days the boy had started these games, Kuja learned to look up to his tricks and find him hanging above his head somewhere, much to the child's disappointment.

How odd. After nine years of life, Kuja had never truly used his own tail as a productive means. He still could not control his appendage very well, especially when he thought of it more like a bother than a useful part of his body. Instead, his tail seemed to have a mind of its own, always revealing a part of his current feelings when trying to hide them. His tail was partly how Garland was able to read his fear or nervousness whenever they faced each other, despite Kuja's stoic attitude and appearance.

What Kuja thought of a physical burden had become a playful and productive tool to his little brother.

Perhaps it was time for him to train his own tail too because he seriously lacked experience with it.

However, one of the more amazing feats, much to Kuja's relief, was Zidane's acquired aptitude to get rid of his wastes by himself without help. The child would run farther from their town to leave his wastes without having to trouble anyone and especially not his older brother and the old man Garland who Zidane had started to fear over the months.

So many premature abilities assimilated in a short time made everything easier for Kuja, but there was one crucial aptitude which Zidane still lacked.

The toddler could not speak yet.

Kuja could not tell exactly why Zidane was unable to speak at the physical age of two. From what he had been taught from the books depicting details on Humans and Terrans biology, normal children of his age should be able to utter random words or even full but short sentences. Even though Zidane could hardly be called a normal child, from his genetic setup, the boy should be, at least, able to utter some gibberish beyond comprehension.

The only sounds forming from the child's vocal cords were moans, grunts and cries.

The older sibling was worried by the young child's lack of speech. However, his worries were aimed toward their master Garland who appeared more frustrated over this. Zidane was supposed to be his perfect Angel of Death, one with a greater mission on a worldwide scale. How could something so important for the future of their home planet not be able to speak?

But speech or not, Kuja put his trust on fate. He knew Zidane's ability to speak will come with experience, teaching, trials and errors. At the very least, the boy understood most of the words that were spoken to him. To wash over their master's concerns, Kuja demonstrated that Zidane was able to point at certain objects in the rooms when he mentioned specific words. The boy even understood the adjectives when Zidane caught the smallest container on the table or chose the blue pencil on the desk. These demonstrations offered Garland enough assurance about his "perfect" Angel of Death.

With Zidane comprehending words and sentences despite his lack of speech, Kuja thought it might be the time to teach few magic tricks to his tiny

protégé. By now, Kuja had learned a wide variety of spells, including curative magic and most of elemental attacks. While he couldn't call himself a master to the level of Garland, he thought to be powerful enough to become Zidane's magic teacher.

"Zidane, you need to pay careful attention to my movements," Kuja told as Zidane stared at him from his rock where he sat on, curious to the strange hands movements his brother had begun. The elder sibling closed his eyes, drawing his focus on the spell that started to form between his dancing fingers. He whispered an incantation in a language unknown to the younger one. Finally, Kuja hollered a short cry and a flaming ball appeared out of nowhere from his palm, which had shut Zidane with his mouth agape in amazement.

With his younger brother enthralled by the feat, Kuja couldn't help but sense some pride within, especially when the only other decent sentient being on Terra, Garland, had never been impressed by his skills. Crouching over the impressed Zidane with the fire closer to him, Kuja expressed his warmest smile of pride. "This is the most basic magic spell, Fire. Now, it's time for you t—"

Kuja’s speech was interrupted when Zidane caught the hand with the Fire spell, the boy still in shock. His action had cancelled the magic Kuja had ignited. With the magic gone, the child giggled before he launched himself elsewhere to explore the surrounding. Irritated by his brother’s lack of attention, Kuja folded his arms with a humph and looked away.

“Foolish brat!” Kuja hissed out. “How are you going to be a worthy Angel of Death if you keep losing your attention?!”

Despite appreciating Zidane’s existence in his life, Kuja had taken the bad habit to call his brother with bratty nicknames thanks to the boy’s quick and overexcited personality, being Kuja’s complete opposite. Thankfully, Zidane never seemed to be upset by these nicknames.

Ignoring his brother’s comments, Zidane trotted around and checked his environment in a quest to find diverse discoveries. Already, the boy grew weary to see the same lifeless atmosphere on Terra. Whenever he’d find things moving, it was either Kuja, his boring Genome kin, the enclosed Silver Dragons and the scary Garland. He had not encountered any Moogle nor monsters so far, their

master thinking Zidane was not ready to meet them. A lifeless world was not ideal for a toddler full of energy that needed to be unleashed, after all. Letting a sigh out, Kuja followed him.

After giving this bare land some exploration, with his guardian having a hard time following him behind, a sound caught Zidane's curiosity. A strange noise sounding like soft snores came from his left and Zidane rushed to the spot. Hidden in a hole on the ground, a creature he had never seen before sounded asleep. The boy couldn't quite get his hands on what the creature was, looking too unfamiliar from his Genome siblings and different from the Silver Dragons despite their white fur, in both morphology and appearance. This furred being was about as small as himself, but it was chubbier than anything he'd seen before. This one had white fur all around, short arms and short legs, big red nose and purple wings. A red feature looking like a soft pompom hung over its head.

Curious to find out more of this unknown creature, the toddler adopted his careful stance before he slowly approached it. He continued to stare at it from a certain distance, noting its continuous up and down movement from its slow breathing.

Excited from his new discovery, Zidane bounced backward, trying to call his brother with some cries, but Kuja was still far behind. From the distance, Kuja stopped and offered the child a glare before he gave in to some tired panting. Decidedly, he needed to give his own legs some training.

Wanting to play a game with the creature, Zidane turned back to the furred thing and crouched himself on all four. His grin taking over his lips, he put on a frown over his brows like he had to focus on the creature. After running endlessly, Kuja joined his brother, exhausted. When he found the new sleeping being that was Zidane's newest attention, the young man chuckled, amused by how eager for action the tiny boy appeared. Kuja watched Zidane's tail brushing wide left and right on the dusty ground. The boy was about to bounce on it at any time now.

But an unfamiliar, aggressive sound surged out.

A growl.

From Zidane.

That low growl, that stance… Kuja had seen something like this before… on the wild beasts and predators on Gaia hunting for preys.

Before Kuja knocked off these odd thoughts, Zidane had already bounced on the furred creature, bringing it away from its sleep. Startled by the brutal awakening, the creature shrieked and screamed, struggling to get away from the aggressive Genome. Zidane wasn’t conceding, and in spite of his snarls and cries, the child attempted to claw and bite the being. Horrified by the scene, Kuja quickly rushed from his spot and tried catching his brother.

But the little creature wasn’t going to abandon without putting up a fight. As a last resort, with a war cry, it kicked Zidane out of the way, propelling the child in the air before Kuja caught him by his tail, saving him from a nasty landing and injury. Hung by the tail, Zidane tried turning around and emitted loud panicking hisses at whomever was taking hold of him from behind. When he spotted his older brother holding him by the tail, his aggressive grunts turned into silence, the little boy questioning Kuja’s intervention in this fight he had been so preoccupied with.

The frown on Kuja was not looking very promising for Zidane, and the little boy suddenly pout at him, feeling guilty.

“Zidane, this is a Moogle,” Kuja told Zidane, drawing his little brother closer to his face. Despite his angry face, Kuja’s voice sounded calm. “They are part of Terra and they are not our enemies. You should not hurt them.”

“Right, kupo!” the Moogle shouted after the brothers as it dusted itself, its anger still perceptible in its pose and voice. Thankfully, it didn’t appear wounded, but it seemed rather shaken by the event. Granting Kuja a glare, it added, “You should teach this kiddo some manners, kupo!”

Manners, right. Garland had programmed Zidane to be an Angel of Death, just like Kuja. However, from the day he had gained sentience, Kuja had never felt the need to attack things without any purpose other than his own convenience. What he had seen in Zidane’s stance was something completely different, the stance of someone wishing death upon another for no apparent reason.

Perhaps Kuja might be imagining things. He did not believe that a toddler with a mental age of a two-year-old could even think of killing things. No one on Terra had ever shoved him the concept of killing and death. There was no future nor death, only life and present. For an uncorrupted soul devoid of evil

and experience, innocence was all a child like Zidane should be.

Through his short life, Zidane had been premature on so many things. Did he already know his purpose to bring death upon living things? Was it why he had attacked the Moogle?

What if Kuja was right? What if Zidane truly was programmed and intended to kill mindlessly starting at a very early era of his life? Certainly, right now, he was too young and inexperienced to even wound an innocent Moogle who was able to pack some punch into him, but years might shape the child into a powerful killer beyond compare.

Only time will tell.

“Kuja!”

“What?”

“Kuja! Kuja!”

“What do you want?”

“Kuja!”

He did not remember when this had started exactly. When Zidane, now aged two and with a morphology of a three-year-old, had finally begun to utter his first word, it had to be his brother's name. Since then, the toddler screamed his name whenever he had his mouth open. Using different intonation, he'd hollered the name everywhere he stumbled upon, whether it was to gain Kuja's attention, the Genomes' and even Garland's who he seemed to have stopped to fear, but he still maintained his distance with. Nevertheless, it was impossible for anyone to get a certain guess of what Zidane meant when he said the name. Yet, Kuja now began to hate hearing his own name for the fifty-seventh time since his rude awakening this morning.

What a pity, to hate the name he used to cherish as a part of the core that made him a soulful being.

But then, his name was the only word Zidane could say clearly, after all. Better just let him have his fun shouting it endlessly.

However, pure exhaustion led Kuja into ignoring his hyper little brother who appeared to be full of energy on this sad day. Kuja needed his nap right now, and not even a loud child will stop him in his

quest for slumber. Turning his back against the bratty child on his bed, Kuja closed his eyes.

Yet, it appeared that Zidane was rather determined to not let his sibling get the sleep he deserved.

The boy bounced on the bed, crying his brother's name again and his hands gripped to Kuja's shoulders. Seeing that the elder wasn't near to flinch, Zidane shook him harder and let few wails out before bringing his annoyance to the next level by giving Kuja some whacks on his head with his tail. Unfortunately, the whacking moves weren't strong enough to stir the brother away from his bed and to remedy this once and for all, Kuja pushed Zidane away from him with his bulkier silver tail, causing the boy to fall on the floor.

After recovering from the meager fall, Zidane's eyes began to tear up and his lips trembled. As the sniffles and snorts escaped his nose, he bawled for a short moment, outraged by Kuja's resistance from his attempts at getting his attention.

And then, a noise stirred Kuja's attention.

Another growl.

No, not again…

Over the months since his first attack on that Moogle, Zidane had been engulfed by random spurs of aggressiveness like he had too much energy contained within. Whenever these events occurred, Zidane would begin to growl at whatever he faced, whether they were monsters or other Moogles. And then, he would try ripping them apart, if not for Kuja's interventions before Zidane could cause damage. Thankfully, the child would stop and calm himself if Kuja interrupted him. To this day, Kuja could not tell if this was what Garland had wanted on his second angel, to become feral all of a sudden with no warning, but he had been too afraid to ask their master.

Perhaps… was it so the "perfection" would get rid of the "imperfection" when he'd expect it the less…?

The inevitable came for him. Before he could get up from his bed, a powerful kick struck him from behind, causing him a pain to his entire dorsal area. With a sudden cry and moan of pain, Kuja turned quickly, now facing his feral little brother who jumped back on his two feet after the awkward landing after he had kicked him. Back to his attacking and defensive stance, the child maintained

his growl before he let a strange hiss out, the hair on his head and the fur on his tail bristling with rage.

Kuja tried to retain his indifference, to show that he had the upper hand over the situation, but his barely opened eyes induced the shock from having been attacked by his own brother, a first since these attacks had started. Zidane was starting to shove his feral instincts onto his own family.

It was so strange to watch this incontrollable side of this seemingly innocent child who would always cling to him.

For few seconds, worries of his own fate as well as Zidane's resurfaced. If Zidane was to eliminate Kuja one day… what should happen?

No… That won't happen… Never…

Never!

And suddenly…

"NO!"

It all came instinctively. Kuja screamed a booming "no" at the toddler and at the same time, without even realizing it, he slapped him hard on the head, giving enough pack to launch Zidane rolling to the floor. Even the palm of his hand that was used to

slap tickled with a spreading pain like tiny bugs crawling all over the skin. Succumbing to a heavy and slow breath, Kuja coldly glared at the child on the floor, keeping his authority over him and hardening the frown over his expression.

The image of Garland using his hard, metallic hands to slap him flashed.

As the frown on his face subdued, Kuja shook his head.

What was that? How could he even be thinking of the old man right now? Garland had slapped Kuja many times before, sometimes without any clear reason. Each time, Kuja found himself bleeding in the mouth or with a bruise on the face that could last for several days. The pain from the move would always tame Kuja, forcing him into obedience until he forgot about the pain and went into his mischievous behaviors again.

But Zidane… He had attacked him. His intentions were deliberated. Kuja had the right to slap and hurt a bratty kid who had attacked him for no reason other than to gain his attention! Kuja was not guilty of anything, and he refused to show any remorse! He had to teach this boy a lesson! He, too, was a fearless Angel of Death!

With the aggressiveness leaving him and few upcoming sobs coming, Zidane struggled to get back on his feet. His vision blurred by the tears escaping his eyes, he glued his sight at his brother who glared back, the frown on Kuja's face returning to him. Rubbing his eyes, Zidane was unable to stop the hiccups. That was the first time ever Kuja had hurt him, and while this was painful to Zidane's cheeks, there was something from within that was even more hurtful than a simple, strong slap on the face. The boy couldn't tell what it was, but it hurt his mind so much that a long bawl came out of his throat before a loud crying session began.

After letting a humph out like he hadn't had any care of Zidane's tantrum, Kuja turned away from his crying brother and went back to sleep, having gotten used to the crying so much over the months he'd sleep through the piercing and annoying yells. He was going to get his nap, and that was final.

Yet, something came to crawl between his arms as he shut his lids. Dammit, how he longed to be left alone for once… But when he opened his eyes, he realized it was Zidane who came to snuggle discreetly to him as if he was seeking comfort and warmth, right from his tormentor. His crying had stopped now, but the sniffles and warm tears

persisted. Rubbing his reddened cheeks on his brother's comforting cloth over the chest, he soaked his warm tears on the fabric. Trying to stretch his tiny arms as wide as possible to embrace Kuja into a full hug, the boy soon gave up and let his tail roll around his brother's waist instead. When Zidane retracted his arms to his chest, he fell asleep.

Zidane might not be able to speak other words than Kuja's name, but the older brother knew it was the child's way to tell him he was sorry.

With a new peace of mind restored, Kuja smiled and returned the affection with a soft stroke on the toddler's hair before he slumbered into the nap he sought for.

Unfortunately, Zidane's feral shenanigans on Kuja continued over the next weeks. Thankfully, Kuja never remained impassive with each time. Whenever Zidane started entering into his attacking stance and faced him, Kuja immediately shouted "no" at him. Knowing that a painful strike might come if he ever was to hurt his caregiver and the one who raised him, Zidane was conditioned to refrain from attacking him. And besides, he hated when

Kuja was furious or when he shouted the “no” word which he soon came to pick as his second word.

With all these trainings and gained experiences, Zidane had learned to see Kuja not only as a precious older brother, but as an authority figure who he should hold full respect for. Thanks to this, Zidane had finally stopped attacking the one he considered his only true sibling.

Still, as odd as it seemed, they were given an innate satisfaction over watching things suffer. Kuja did not try to stop Zidane from attacking anything other than the rarer Moogles or the scarcer and roaming Silver Dragons. Instead, whenever they’d wander in their hometown Bran Bal, Zidane would often feel the urge to bite and claw into a random Genome at each part of their bodies, whether it was their tails or another limb, before kicking them to the ground. Realizing that the other Genome never fought back unlike Kuja, the toddler sensed bliss and fun into hurting a harmless fellow. Sometimes, even Kuja took part of this little game of hurt and heal wherein he tested his newly learned magic spells before he healed them with a Curaga spell. This never-ending cycle of fun was so convenient as the soulless Genomes would simply get hurt and then healed back as if nothing happened. They would get

back on their feet and continue their boring, eternal lives as Garland's servants.

At first, Kuja thought that with an endless supply of passive subjects wandering in this sad town, why not taking advantage of their numbers? Garland shouldn't care about losing a Genome or two, seeing he could just replace them with another, if it ever came to that.

Yet, Kuja thought wrong. When Garland discovered their mischiefs, he ordered them to never kill the Genomes. According to him, each Genome vessels were to bear some specific souls when Terra will be revived, which Kuja believed it to be the truth. As a fruit of the ancient Terran civilization himself, Garland had been programmed to never lie about facts he was certain about. Out of curiosity, this prompted Kuja to wonder what kind of souls Garland had shoved into him and Zidane, but the old man was still programmed to not answer a question when he refused to, like this time.

Exhibiting a shrug and a mocking smirk, Kuja said, "I guess I was someone evil and important in my past life. I suppose you gave Zidane the soul of a bratty hero."

Of course, Garland had not been made capable of humor. Without even confirming the comment, he warned them that if he found out they were doing it again, Kuja knew of the consequences. But then, Kuja was needed to take care of his perfect Genome, so Garland certainly was not ready to take his soul away now. That did not deter them from continuing their games against the Genomes, one of their main causes of their slavery to Garland. To see them suffer and struggle their wraths drove the angels to pure satisfaction.

But even one created to bring death had fears.

As Zidane's strength rose and his awareness grew stronger, what will the future hold for Kuja? The silver-haired Genome knew from the start that Zidane was meant to replace him one day. While this fateful day will only come much later in many years, what should exactly determine this day? Garland had produced Zidane's core as wild and energetic just so he could kill as easily as he could breathe in his later life. When Zidane will be older, will he kill Kuja too?

Perhaps this was Garland's intention, to dispose of the failed angel prototype without ever staining his own metallic hands. His perfect Angel of Death

will proceed with the task himself. This will be the moment Garland will win against Kuja's efforts to keep up with his soul and life, his miserable life as a puppet of the man he hated.

No, Kuja won't allow this! Zidane won't be like that! Zidane had a soul too, and nothing will change that fact. Having a soul meant having a will, and Zidane will forge a will on his own. And with enough care, Zidane will follow exactly as Kuja will dictate.

Yes, they will fight Garland together.

During his life, Zidane had interacted with Master Garland on rare occasions. Most of the times they met, Garland came to have a speech with Kuja of subjects that were beyond the child's understanding. Once upon a time, when Zidane had acquired awareness of his existence, he had feared the old man to the point he'd hide behind Kuja with each meeting, even if their meeting had no evil intention. For some time, Kuja had questioned the reason for Zidane's behavior, and when he had asked the child, the boy had simply pointed at Garland and shivered. Of course, that did not give the answer he

sought for, but Kuja had decided to dismiss it as their master's fearsome appearance. To reassure him, Kuja had told that their master should not be attacked. As long as Zidane left him alone, Garland will not hurt him. The child had learned to believe this.

It was only months later that Zidane had stopped fearing him like he was used to his existence and presence whenever the old man was nearby.

Sometimes, Garland spoke of Zidane's purpose as an Angel of Death and other things, which Zidane could not grasp the concepts yet. However, the old man did this intentionally so the child will get used with the terms and eventually, he'll understand his life. For now, everything about the Iifa Tree, the Mist, the planet Gaia or the planets' fusion were of no importance to him. Everything Garland told him bored him, and the moment he stopped his speech, Zidane would return to play and explore. Soon, he brought these games to the next level by trying to fight random monsters in the vast empty lands of Terra.

Zidane's feral side was brought back by Garland as he ordered Kuja to teach the boy how to control his wild urges. The little boy should not hurt

everything that moved. Killing monsters were acceptable, but he got to learn how to choose which to kill and which to allow to live. If his urges were left alone, Zidane could kill the other Genomes and even run to Garland himself at any time. After all, a mindless killer on the loose on Gaia will surely get killed fast too. Gaians weren't like the defenseless, soulless Genomes.

However, one day, the dreadful moment Kuja secretly yearned for occurred, not long before Zidane should reach his fourth year of life.

Zidane hadn't merely hurt a Genome. He had killed her.

The mess he left after killing her was not a body bathing in blood. It was a chaotic clutter of flesh and open wounds with blood splatters on the ground. What made up of her Genome appearance was unrecognizable after the attack. This had happened while Kuja had been busy cleaning up his home while Zidane played outside alone, having nothing else to do. When Kuja discovered the scene with a bloodied Zidane bouncing on the dead Genome, his first thought before even having Garland in mind was that he was glad to have not been the one to become the distorted carcass.

Unfortunately, Garland was not far from the scene either. Seeing that both angels were present, with an oddly calm Zidane staring at him with wide, puppy eyes and with a nervous, frozen Kuja, the android wished he could put the blame on the elder brother. However, with how spotted clean Kuja's whole attire was while Zidane soaked in the victim's blood, he knew he had to scold them both. Yet, Zidane was still a toddler, one unable to make clear decisions without an older caregiver to monitor him.

So, that meant Kuja had not been monitoring Zidane carefully enough.

Yes, that must have been it. Kuja was to blame for this vicious attack. How could a three-year-old even be aware of what he was committing into?

The powerful slap did not wait. Kuja was struck by it fast enough that he had no time to dodge or do anything else. From where he stood, Zidane stared at the scene, his eyes narrowing with a feeling he had never truly thrived with before which caused him to be confused and yet afraid. He was worried too, worried of seeing the mean old man granting Kuja more violent slaps and punches with blood now covering his brother's face.

Zidane sensed panic.

The boy could not think straight as the tears blurred his vision and bawls prompted his lips to tremble in panic. Their master was causing so much pain to Kuja. He couldn’t just stand here and watch the scene. He had to do something to stop the mean old man from hurting Kuja.

Taking a step backward, Zidane launched himself from his spot and landed straight on the android, readying a kick on his head that was powerful enough for Garland to lose his grip over Kuja. With all these snarls and growls, the boy began to claw his master face with his pointed nails, aiming to pierce through it. Garland screamed, trying to get this tiny toddler out of his skull, but unable to see anything as Zidane’s body covered his eyes, his wide, heavy hands could never get a good grip on the child.

Having crawled away from the scene in distress, Kuja found refuge meters away, shaking the blood out of his mouth and nose before he casted Cure on himself to heal his face. All the commotion sounds confused him, but when he was recovered enough to watch the fighting scene, his mouth went agape. It was an event worthy of his oddest dreams.

A feral Zidane attacking Master Garland.

From the way the boy led the fight, Zidane was positively seeking to kill Garland with each strike he inflicted, exhibiting a newly acquired hatred for their master. A side of Kuja was struck by pure delight over their now shared hatred, but another side couldn’t just believe what a tiny being was capable of. He had truly underestimated his brother.

The battle raged on, with Zidane now struggling to reach for the softest part of Garland’s head which appeared to be the eyes. Before he was able to claw them, the old man managed to catch the boy by the tail. Without thinking, Garland threw him with a quick swing toward the ground, tossing him toward Kuja’s direction. Zidane landed straight to the ground on his left arm with a blaring scream, where Kuja hurried and joined him. However, a leg was giving up to his body weight, having earned a sprain to the ankle which slowed him.

Despite his weakened arm from the violent landing, Zidane was able to get back on all four. Still shaken by the strength Garland had used to toss him out, the boy slowly crawled to his slumping brother close by, climbing up to his chest before whining his tears out and hugging the other. Noticing the blood that was Zidane’s own from the injuries he sustained from their master, Kuja began to cast more Cure to

soothe his wounds before he gave him few soft strokes. Each fiber of their muscles ached from the battle, but at least they were going to be fine.

“Kuja, I have warned you,” Garland commented, suddenly all calm, but he had adopted his strict tone to project his authority over his servants. “You can use the Genomes as target dummies, but I do not want them killed. You have failed yet again by letting Zidane kill your own kind. I need him to be able to control himself and not kill anyone mindlessly. Do you realize what should happen if Zidane is left on Gaia? Folks will defend themselves against him and they will kill him.”

Covering his child brother between his arms and tail as if to protect him from the old man, Kuja presented his master a longing, furious glare. He protested, “Zidane is still an infant. Whatever you say, you cannot tame an infant.”

Garland objected, “Zidane is three years old, meaning he is a child, not an infant.”

A strange, twisted smile shaped onto Kuja’s face. “He cannot speak more than two words and he is reaching his fourth year soon.”

This time, Garland burst in anger. “Enough! Do not question the facts! I do not want a feral child! Zidane needs to be able to tame his instincts to carry on with his purpose!”

“Your purpose.”

Taken aback by Kuja’s insolence, Garland was ready to give him another violent slap on the face. Seeing that the silver-haired servant was not going to walk away any time soon, he raised a hand, preparing the dreaded slap. Without even flinching, Kuja’s stare was glued to his master, not even making any effort to avoid the upcoming strike. He even offered him a teasing smile which seemed to infuriate the old man.

Still providing his little brother continuous soft strokes, Kuja was ready.

… The slap never came.

Instead, Garland dropped his hand and turned around, leaving the brothers in their fates. It no longer was anyone’s concern but theirs. “Clean this area and dispose of this Genome’s body!” he ordered the other Genomes around to do his bidding, and they promptly obeyed. Without even drawing his attention back at the angels, he raised his voice and

said, “Kuja, if you want to let Zidane kill things, go to Gaia. Teach him to be discreet of his actions. He cannot be seen killing everything like this.”

Garland requested that Zidane did not meet the Gaian civilizations yet, as long as he could not fully tame his feral instincts. According to their master, the boy was deemed not ready to deal with the more sentient races, and especially not with the unpredictable Humans.

Kuja had never really enjoyed experiencing the wildlife on Gaia, but Zidane seemed to have fun exploring this new universe. Gaia was so different from Terra on unimaginable levels with this lively world bathing in a soothing blue sky filled with lives and souls everywhere, unlike the borefest that was Terra. With the careful monitoring from Kuja, Zidane would jump everywhere on this land that held so many varieties of environments, whether it was a bare land that still hosted lives or a patch of warming, green woods, where many soulful creatures had made their home. Watching many lives and vegetation in one place amazed the boy so much he began to chase after everything that moved. At first, he had been surprised by the animals’ reactions

as they would try to escape him unlike the Genomes, but then, he understood that living things were much different on Gaia. Of course, he had killed few things already, mainly insects and small animals that were proven harmless to him. The big ones were either too aggressive or too strong for him, and Zidane learned about this fast when he tried taking on a canine animal called Fang. Thankfully, Kuja was always present to heal him with his Cure magic. Most of the preys that were unfortunate enough to fall under Zidane or Kuja's attacks provided decent food to sustain them. Thanks to Kuja's Fire magic, they were able to make their meats tastier and easier to chew with some cooking. After more explorations, Kuja taught Zidane about fruits scattered in the woods that he could eat, and this had been the child's first experience into tasting sweet things, which he adored.

If Zidane could speak the words, he'd beg Kuja to stay on Gaia forever, now wanting to forget about the awful synthetic food on Terra.

The part Kuja especially hated when wandering on Gaia was the lack of a proper home and a roof. He did not like his meager, tiny home in Bran Bal either, but at least, there were no tiny creatures trying to crawl or bite him during his sleep at home.

Gaia’s wildlife was a different story where he found himself exposed to the irritating animals, insects and the natural weather like rain. Even the tents a nicer Moogle offered them were not enough to provide complete shelter from the tiniest bugs. However, Zidane loved to sneak out of their tent at night to explore the nightlife of the wild, where even more innocent creatures roamed to avoid the bigger predators that wandered during day time.

Over the weeks, like Garland had requested, Kuja successfully taught Zidane not to attack everything and that they should only hurt and kill when it was convenient. And to Kuja’s surprise, Zidane was able to make use of a better stealth like the big predators. He was now capable of sneaking into an attack on things to minimalize injuries. It should make everything easier for them to survive this harsher, but more fun world.

By the time Zidane reached four, he’d been more attentively following his brother’s advices and acquiring more fighting experiences to the point Kuja was now confident Zidane will be able to take on bigger monsters. The child even stopped going after the small defenseless creatures. Now, instead of escaping when facing predators and big fearless animals, the brothers fought them together. Thanks

to their constant stroll on Gaia, Kuja's spiritual powers and Zidane's rising raw strength and speed were beyond most of Gaians' reach. The big and strong monsters were no match for them.

Yet, the siblings were not invincible. There were few wild creatures that were too strong for them, even if they worked in team. Kuja counted two main Gaian species that were beyond their level; the Grand Dragons and the adorable, yet very savage Yans which Kuja made the wrong assumption from their cute appearances that they were innocent creatures. It was near at the cost of their own lives that they learned of their strength, but it was thanks to Kuja's curative magic that they were able to escape their premature death from them.

If only Zidane had the potential for magic… Kuja eventually gave up trying to teach him spells, but Garland had told him once his second angel should be more adept at physical strength and speed. Kuja had always wondered why Zidane was created as such. After all, magic had a more devastating impact when it came into eliminating their foes… or destroy a world.

Whenever they returned to Terra with the Invincible, Zidane was disappointed. He still didn't

like Terra, he hated its food and they were to meet with the mean old man all the time there. After noting the progresses on each angel, Garland seemed quite pleased and even started to mention that he might have been wrong about Kuja being a failed prototype. But even with the given praises, the hatred Kuja had for him will not subdue. However, their master resented Kuja for the bothering fact that Zidane could only speak three words, which was hardly a progress from the two he knew a year before.

Kuja. No. Yes.

Right, but after four years raising him and watching him grow, only Kuja seemed to understand whatever Zidane meant using different intonations and emotional tones when he said these words. The brothers' relation was truly beyond Garland's expectation. Even if Kuja hardly exhibited his own emotions unlike Zidane, Garland could see the deep care they exchanged for each other, like a true parent and a child.

But in these days, Kuja feared this relation will not last.

Even if Kuja had efficiently taught Zidane to control his urges, there were times on Gaia when he

deliberately left their foes to the child alone, letting him do the dirty job of fighting monsters. Whenever Kuja did this, Zidane found bigger enjoyment to watch things suffer his wrath.

When Kuja did not intervene in battles, Zidane became a wild, mindless Angel of Death.

His fighting stance projected a strange aura, the aura of a soul who enjoyed the death of others. His calculating cold eyes reflected the madness with only one wish in sight, and that was the defeat of his foes. Over the next months, using his aptitude of stealth and speed, not only he succeeded into killing a ferocious Grand Dragon by himself without being injured, but also a pair of Yans, where he stood wounded but victorious. Even Kuja had never achieved this feat in his twelve years of existence.

If everything went according to Garland's plan, even if the boy cared and loved his older brother like no one else…

Kuja feared for his life.

One of the reasons Garland had in mind when he had crafted his second Angel of Death was to dispose of his first prototype in a way or another. With the fast progresses Zidane made in only four

years, Kuja's last day of life could be happening any time, sooner or later. If this ever came too soon, Kuja won't have any time to formulate a plan to get rid of Garland.

Kuja knew he had the better potential to become an almighty sorcerer who should be powerful enough to take on Garland one day, but Zidane's existence might not allow him to live long enough to see that day.

Zidane's strength and presence will become a nuisance to his plans. If the boy's fury will continue to build up into intense powers with further experiences, the instincts to kill Kuja for his own pleasure might come to surface soon.

But Kuja will not allow this. He was older, more powerful for now and he definitely possessed the brain to plan things. Even with such premature strength, Zidane was no match for Kuja.

He had to get rid of Zidane and fast! It was either Kuja or the bratty little brother. The young man could go with the simplest plan of disposing him with a little death. This will be easy since Kuja was the only one allowed to get close to Zidane as the boy would deliberately overpower everyone else.

But killing Zidane will certainly bring wrath over his master. Garland will be enraged, perhaps so much he will wish to dispose of Kuja. If this was to happen, Kuja could escape on Gaia and hide. He could attempt living among the Humans and pass as their kind…

Yes, this might work. He'll get to live, he'll be saved and Garland will not find him!

This was right. They were returning to Gaia today for another stroll. When the night will darken the planet their master sought to destroy, Kuja will destroy Garland's perfection. Tonight, he will not prey on a monster.

He will prey on a brother.

As with each day on Gaia, Zidane was excited to find new creatures to discover and taste. It was a nice experience to devour each new prey they got to kill. It not only made them stronger, but they got to taste many new delicious meats. Gaia was the playground every small children wished for, and he could not understand his master's desire to see this world destroyed.

When the night came, Zidane was overtaken by fatigue, having beaten a young Griffin to death

which had been powerful enough to sustain damage and exhaust the boy. In short minutes, during Kuja's sleep, Zidane fell into complete slumber and crawled himself into his brother's arms.

But Kuja was not sleeping.

Kuja had carefully sneaked himself away from his brother, trying to leave him into his peaceful slumber. Zidane gently stirred as Kuja moved, but he quickly went back to sleep. Thankfully, Zidane's sleeps were always deep and the boy was hard to wake, perhaps a talent Kuja yearned for thanks to his own lack of rest. There was no need to cast a Sleep magic on him. He won't wake up.

If he will ever…

Calmly, Kuja took out a knife he had borrowed from his home, holding it within his slender fingers. The blade reflected the fear and madness from his eyes, his sight now set on the sleeping brat unaware of his guardian's intention. The little child left some soft snores before making few moans out of his mouth, his tail swaying up and down on the ground like he was having a nice dream.

His innocent-looking pose and noises suddenly distracted him. Kuja shook his head, struggling to

ignore this. Slowly, he moved the knife over Zidane's body, the weapon firm between his two hands. To make sure the task will be completed, he shut his eyes.

He waited.

And waited.

His hands shivered.

… No, he had to get grip of himself. He tightened, now ready for his task. The knife ready over the body, he waited.

And waited.

And waited…

"Ku… ja…"

Wait, that voice… Zidane…

"… ja…"

Had Zidane wakened up already? No, that could not be! Kuja opened his eyes and…

No, Zidane had his eyes shut. However, a small smile took place over his lips.

He waited.

And waited.

And then…

“N-No…” Kuja took a step back, his entire body shaking in horror and his knife dropped to the ground. He had been so close to kill Zidane, the only being who had ever given him love.

Love, right… Was Zidane actually having some kind of happy dream? What was he even dreaming about? He said his brother’s name during his sleep, the only word with more than one syllable he could utter. There was a clear reason why this was his first word, and that was because Zidane loved Kuja.

This young, ignorant brat needed his caregiver, his older brother, to see the light in this miserable world where they were slave to their creator together. Kuja had a duty as the older sibling. It was to take care of Zidane, to make sure he grew up happy.

No, no, no! He will not commit into this killing! He was an Angel of Death, but bringing death to family was not right. This was unethical, immoral and wicked to kill such a young child that loved him!

He will need another plan, one that will require no death.

… Yes, this might be it.

He remembered an old detail that Garland had taught him about the Invincible, a feature that his master forbade to use unless needed. There was a room in the airship equipped with special teleporters that will transport anything, whether they were living things or simple objects, to a random point on Gaia, if programmed with certain inputs. Kuja was taught these programs once and he had yet to forget them. Now, only if he could make use of this very convenient feature to save himself…

Later during another day, when they travelled back to Terra together to get their progress check by Garland, the old man had been too busy to meet with them. This was another rather convenience for Kuja, and it was time to put his plan into motion. Staying in the Invincible, Zidane rushed in the airship, visiting random rooms to hide away from Kuja as a part of his hide-and-seek game. However, knowing Zidane by heart, Kuja always knew where to find him. As the elder brother discovered him in the teleporter room which Zidane had been warned several times to never play with the operation

control stand, Kuja told him that he was too tired to play. Disappointed, Zidane stood by Kuja's side, holding him by his tail and trying to bother him.

When the boy found out Kuja was walking to the control stand which Garland had forbidden to use, he gasped with the perplexity obvious in his eyes. "Kuja?" Zidane asked, the pout and the anxious stare put up on his face.

Right, by leaving Zidane on one of the teleporting pods, Kuja will be able to teleport his brother to a random point to Gaia, where he will be lost, where he will not be able to kill anyone else but Gaians. Kuja will be safe. Garland will never find him. Zidane will be lost forever. Kuja knew the unknown did not scare Zidane and he was confident that the child will overcome all obstacles and live on his own. He had observed him handling with his life on Gaia on surviving in the wildlife, and Zidane will certainly survive.

And if he was lucky, Zidane will find a new sentient being that will take him in and raise him into a free creature.

Zidane will survive, and Kuja will survive too. And perhaps, the most of all, Zidane will be freed from Garland.

Yet… What if… What if Kuja left with Zidane on Gaia too? Freedom sure sounded pleasant and refreshing. They could live their lives together in the unknown, where they will develop into something else than Garland's Angels of Death. No one to monitor them. No one to check on their progress. No war to have in mind. Garland will not be able to track them. They will be simple Humans with a tail, living among Gaia's civilization. This will be his dreamed life, a life of freedom.

Oh, but…

To escape using the teleportation pods, someone had to take control of the control stand…

… And Zidane might still kill him on Gaia if they escaped together, even without Garland's influence. It could have been programmed in his core…

And if they'd escape together, Garland might still find them. And when it will happen, the dastardly old man will take his soul away.

No, he got to continue his work for Garland. He still needed the Invincible for his plans to rule both worlds.

But he'll be alone again. Yet, it was better than losing his soul or dying.

Shaking his head to toss these thoughts aside, Kuja focused back to the present. Making sure Zidane was staring at him, the older brother gave a long look at the teleportation pods. Curious, the little boy turned his sight to the pods too, trying to figure out what had caught his guardian's attention. There seemed to be nothing of interest though, except that he remembered Garland's warning about these teleporters.

"Zidane," Kuja hushed to his brother as he crouched to his level, making himself reassuring. "You'll go on Gaia, and then, you'll live there. I believe you are a survivor."

Striving to remain attentive, Zidane kept his calm. He looked at the teleporters again and then he turned back at Kuja who was kindly beaming at him. After swallowing, Zidane drew his focus on the teleporters once more and pointed at them. "Kuja…?" the boy asked, his curiosity turning into doubts.

This was it. It was now or never. Kuja's plan will go smooth. When the teleporter will transport Zidane to the unknown of Gaia, Kuja will be alone to continue his long-term projects. Zidane will be safe from Garland and they will never find him.

When Garland will request the child's whereabouts, Kuja's answer will be simple.

O Master Garland. I bear bad news. Zidane has played with one of the teleporters in the Invincible and he had vanished. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find him. He can be anywhere on Gaia, but the chances to find him again are slim. I cannot blame him or myself, it was an accident!

Yes, his master will be furious and he will be scolded for this. However, he was ready for this inevitable punishment and most of all, he will live. Even without Zidane's presence, Garland needed at least one Angel of Death for his purpose.

"You understood what I just told you, right?" Kuja spoke slowly and checked on the boy's expression to spot confusion and uncertainty. He wanted to make sure Zidane understood him and was not lost.

Unfortunately, he was lost, Kuja could tell as much.

"Y… Yes…?" Zidane managed to say in his puzzled mumbling.

Suddenly, it hurt in his heart.

He shook his head again.

Whether Zidane actually understood the plan or not should not deter him from proceeding with his plan. He must not waste time. Kuja gently dragged his brother to the teleporters and let him stand on one of the pods. “Great, Zidane. Stay here,” Kuja hushed to him while giving him a brush to the cheek with his fingers, appeasing the child. Zidane nodded, yet he was uncertain of what will occur soon.

When Kuja walked back to the control stand, he gave another gaze at the teleporters to make sure his brother stayed on the pod where he had placed him. Thankfully, Zidane was still there, tranquil but his wide, puppy eyes were glued to his caregiver.

This was it. It was now or never.

Kuja’s smile withered.

“Zidane… Good b—”

“KUJA?!”

That deep, hoarse voice from behind, could it be…? Only one individual possessed that voice on Terra, and when Kuja realized what was happening, his shaking hands immediately left the controls. He

turned around to find the one he had been dreading to see since the motion of his plan.

Garland should not have come here that early…

When Kuja had heard Garland calling him, the voice had sounded so physically distant behind. However, when the young man turned around, his master appeared too close to him as if the dreadful old man had teleported himself just behind. After all, with such powers from millenniums of existence, Garland was capable of teleportation without the use of technology.

Before Kuja gasped at him, he was suddenly lifted above the floor when a wide, heavy metallic hand gripped to his face.

“Kuja!” He could hear the faint call of his name from someone else than his tormentor.

Rushed by panic, Kuja began to struggle against the painful strength of his master, his body quivering and his limbs prancing to all directions in fright. He was unable to use his magic to free himself as the continuous strikes from Garland cancelled his spells. His vision was blurred by the excruciating pain he was being afflicted and he could not see the

intensifying fury with a growing hatred and disappointment on the old man's face.

Frozen on his pod, Zidane began to whine and bawl from witnessing the torture inflicted to his dear guardian. "No! Kuja!" the boy screamed again, but Kuja no longer heard him.

"Kuja! What were you planning?!" Garland snarled, not even expecting an answer from the servant he had under the firm grip of his pressing dark fingers. After getting no reply, Garland released Kuja, letting him drop to the floor like a ragdoll. Blood all over his lips and face as he crawled himself away on the cold ground, Kuja moaned of pain with bloodied coughs escaping his throat.

Unable to contain himself and fight his tears, Zidane dashed to his injured brother, crying his name over and over. Coveting his warmth, he gripped to Kuja's chest, hugging him and afraid to lose him.

From the instincts, despite the pain, Kuja's one hand crawled itself to hold onto Zidane's shaking back. His other hand holding to his bloodied mouth, he tried casting a Cure spell. "G-Garl… land…" Kuja stuttered, unable to speak clearly.

“Were you planning to drop Zidane to the unknown Gaia?!” the android hissed, never leaving the Genome brothers from his cold eyes. “Do you even realize he will be lost, or worse, killed, if you did?! Do you know all that, Kuja?!”

Losing his focus and attempting to heal himself without success, Kuja was not ready to offer an answer. Even saying “yes” was, right now, the heaviest struggle of all along this chaos between his crying brother glued to him and the questions uttered by Garland.

Furious by the lack of response and by Kuja’s absence of cooperation, a wild gust coming from Garland separated the brothers from each other, both screeching from being launched in the air before landing hard to the ground. Satisfied by the distance between the angels, the old man rose his palm and casted a powerful Flare magic on Kuja. The bleeding silver-haired angel was propelled by the blast before he rolled on the ground, motionless.

Kuja was no longer bothering to stand back.

“Answer me!” Garland screamed, but truth be told, he was not expecting any answer from the young man anymore. The sole reason for all his doings were to lash his anger onto his first prototype

for his absolute insolence, and Kuja knew this. It was futile to give his master an answer. That will only offer him a slight satisfaction that Garland did not deserve.

Trying to think of something more pleasant to forget about his intense pain, the older angel kept his eyes shut. The relief came back to him when he felt another touch, a gentle one this time, over his body. He'd recognize that gentle, yet nervous, trembling body of Zidane trying to get hold of him with his tiny arms and tail. "Kuja!" the boy cried again before brushing his hands on Kuja's cheeks, not concerned by the staining blood on his attire.

"You worthless, defective Genome!" Garland shouted like a furious, grounding parent. "I should have claimed your soul long ago! You are no longer fit to mentor Zidane! I will take care of this myself now! Kuja, you will come with me to Pandemonium now!"

Not even thinking for a second that his action could harm his precious creature, Garland caught Zidane by his tail before tossing him away from Kuja, launching the boy to the floor in pain. Zidane gave away a shriek as he landed on the ground. With Zidane out of the way from Kuja's reach, Garland

pulled Kuja by his collar, forcing him to hold to a thin thread of his cloth. Submerged by the pain and prisoner from his master's grip, Kuja lost consciousness.

Witnessing his brother's torture brought Zidane's courage and strength to the surface. He was not going to let the mean old man escape with a helpless Kuja! With cries and tears, the boy never stopped calling his brother's name and he rushed to him. Noticing the little brat approaching, Garland swept him away with a mere swing of his free hand, sending Zidane to the floor again.

With Kuja under his arm, Garland carried with his stroll to Pandemonium, wherever he ignored all the screams of despair and the bites from a feral Zidane. With each strike on the old man, Garland threw the kid away like an annoying mosquito. Each bite was as hurtful as an itchy skin, which Garland could completely tolerate.

One of Zidane's shrieks managed to stir Kuja away from his painful slumber. Realizing that Garland was firmly restraining him under an arm, the silver-haired Genome struggled to break free from his excruciating tormentor. "M-Master Garland!" Kuja hollered out of panic, fighting to

squeeze himself out. “What are you scheming against me?! Let me go!”

Despite the struggling creature under his arms that was trying to cast several harmful magic on him, Garland appeared awfully cool and not even hurt by the magical attacks or desperate scratches. Unfortunately for the young Genome, the master held absolute control over him. His deep voice resounding in Pandemonium, he revealed, “You are no longer any use to us anymore. It is futile to let you roam freely like this. You have no right to keep the very thing giving you the freedom of thoughts, your soul.”

That was it, the prospect of living his biggest fear of becoming a soulless vessel, of being nothing but a puppet whose eternal life’s purpose was to follow a master. He will lose his emotions, his core, his individuality. His life will be a fleeting memory, vanished before he was able to leave his mark in this world. He will be forgotten, lost, a worthless former prototype. “No!” Kuja screamed in fear, refusing to befall on his siblings’ mindless level. “This is my body, my core, my soul! I’m not yours to fit into your damn plan! Y-You can’t… can’t…”

The young man’s horror spread onto him as he felt the waving magic casted upon him, a Sleep spell Garland would use on him whenever he thought Kuja rebelled too much against him. His voice leaving him, his lids heavy, he wrestled to keep his eyes open and he attempted one last time to call for help.

Yet, no one could come to him on Terra. There was no other soul.

Unless…

His eyes shut to the image of a crying Zidane staring at him in despair.

Who… Who’s Zidane going to rely on, now…?

…

With the Sleep spell, Garland forced the Genome into slumber, hoping to never hear the voice of this defect. If Kuja was truly a powerful angel, he should have easily avoided his spell.

After giving Zidane another slap to throw him away from his path, Garland pushed the unconscious Kuja over a pod platform, which soon enclosed him inside a transparent tank of glass. The old man walked to the control stand, pressing few buttons

and waited for the process to begin, the final process to discard the soul from its vessel.

“Kuja!” Zidane cried and ran to the tank where Kuja had been imprisoned. Refusing to give up on his condemned brother, the child kicked and slammed on the glass, fighting to break through it to free Kuja. Even though the tank showed no sign of being broken and despite the appearing bruises and bloodied wounds on his body from the violent slams, the boy did not stop.

What stopped him from slamming into the glass was when he saw these weird cables with pointy spikes on their tip appearing from above and piercing all of Kuja’s limbs like a perfect automation. Zidane froze, all in silence but a short sniffle broke his trembling lips. “K-Kuja?” he called again, expecting Kuja to answer.

Of course, Kuja did not, and Zidane whined louder, screaming his brother’s name over and over while struggling to break into the tank.

Ignoring the cries from his now sole angel, Garland pressed another button from his controls. “Zidane, you cannot destroy the tank. It is made of tempered, indestructible glass.”

Lost in thoughts from whatever his master had told him, Zidane glared at him for a second before he returned his focus on Kuja who was still showing no sign of life. All his limbs down like heavy rocks, his whole body slumped down. Sulking, Zidane rubbed his eyes before he put his hands on the tank, giving a grieving gaze at his brother.

“Kuja…” Zidane collapsed at the bottom of the tank, whining and wailing, now close to resign on ever being able to contact with his guardian. He was hardly moving from his spot until he noticed the water slowly filling the tank at the risk of drowning Kuja to his death. Hit by panic again, Zidane began to scream again. “Kuja! No! Kuja! Kuja!”

Now annoyed by the incessant high-pitched screams, Garland yelled after the child. “Will you shut up?! Kuja is not coming back! He will—”

Garland was never able to finish his sentence.

Rather, a strange spectacle began to play itself, interrupting in his speech. When Garland had expected more silly bawls and cries, he heard a low growl from Zidane instead. And yet…

Wait… the child had now become the very distraction that made him forget about everything

else around.

Yes, the sight of Zidane's body giving away a faint glow which soon surrounded him into a pale, bright halo became a marvel to Garland's wide orbits. As the child's eyes shifted into a bloodied crimson hue and parts of his body sprouted patches of long pink fur, the fear and rage in his eyes grew wilder and more intense.

When Garland realized what was happening, he froze.

Could it be…?

Taking few steps back with a mixture of horror and… bliss, the old man said, "Impossible… How did this come so… early? Is this truly the power of… Trance?"

Author's note*: Personally, I'm not fan of the Trance mechanic gameplay, but it seems from a story point of view, it's a super powerful power, enough for Garland to see Zidane as the superior Angel of Death.*

Zidane's lack of speech was inspired from personal experience. Most members of my wide

family (including cousins and all) could barely speak or they had speech delays when younger, even after starting school, but they were still super bright. Today, they are geniuses working as engineers, workers in the health field and more. I just wanted to make Zidane a silly, yet bright kid!

Chapter 4: Trance

Again, thanks to the Guest for the comment!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 4: Trance

An odd, thrilling rush ran through his veins burning with a hatred and a cathartic desire to kill his enemy, yet, all with an innocent passion to protect the one he loved dearly. Feasting his crying, yet savage eyes on his ultimate target that the mean old man had become, Zidane had not looked away from him once from the moment his body had begun to glow until now, his silhouette flashing bright and rendering him invisible to all. When the light subdued, the remnants of the flash left over a feral, furred and bare Genome child with patches of pink fur coats around his skin. Overflowed with full of energy, the boy stood with an attacking stance with his deep, heavy breathing resounding around all Pandemonium and syncing with his tail that swayed wide left and right.

At this moment, it was impossible to tell when the child was going to attack. The feral boy was completely unpredictable.

Watching that frozen horror and shock on his master's face prompted supreme satisfaction over Zidane as his brows furrowed furthermore, his red eyes filled with malice and a mischievous grin escaping his mouth.

Zidane had ascended to his master's ultimate goal. He had achieved Trance.

Garland could not believe it. He had conceived and created Zidane with the Trance concept in mind, but he would have never imagined to see the day of Trance so early in this child's life. He was to reach adulthood before the power would rush into him, but everything occurred so unexpectedly. Nevertheless, this meant his experiment was a success.

"Zidane, my Angel of Death…"

Angel of Death, right. Zidane had heard the term several times before, though he never truly paid any heed to it nor that he cared. The term had no meaning to him. Right now, the only thing that mattered was the bliss forming on Garland, the pure horror swept away from his face.

Zidane was disgusted. He wanted that fear back on the mean old man.

Without any cry or snarl, the child propelled from his spot, landing straight to his master's face who was unprepared for the attack. Zidane kicked him at full strength, driving Garland right to the ground like a projectile. The old man landed on the floor with a scream of pain and before he could even recover, the child jumped on his head with his furred, hard clawed feet, trying to shatter any bones or anything that made this android from the inside. The sight of Garland's panic was a first for anyone on Terra and Zidane enjoyed each second of it. He hoped to see the man die with his own furred hands and claws already stained of his own blood.

What a liberating experience it will be!

And then, suddenly…

"Kuja?"

Right! Kuja! He was still drowning in the tank! If no one was going to help him, Kuja will die if he didn't do anything!

Leaving the wrecked man behind, Zidane rushed back to the tank, crying "Kuja" again, the tears visible despite his glowing brilliance surrounding

him. He flashed like he was teleporting himself, and without losing time, he continuously struck down on the tempered glass, each strike getting more desperate but stronger the higher the water hide Kuja's slumped body.

Shaking his head after the painful blow, the old man recovered from the angel's attack and stood back on his feet, only to nearly collapse from the shocking miracle before him. When he thought the Terran technology couldn't be more indestructible…

… the tempered glass surrounding Kuja began to crack under Zidane's fury.

In a matter of seconds, the tank burst into thousands of smaller glass shatters with the liquid flowing like a torrent, propelling the child away from the platform. Unaware of anything in his unconsciousness, Kuja's body fell over, remaining on the wet platform and avoiding all the shatters with the pointed cables detaching from his limbs. Zidane, however, landed bare on the shatters, leaving him with several painful wounds on his body. But his pain was not deterring him away from his mission to get rid of the man that brought calamity over his brother. With Kuja freed from death, it was time to take his fateful matter in hands.

The light surrounding his body in Trance intensified when Zidane stood back and left a furious growl, now staring back at Garland, his red, teary eyes glowing with a rising fury. The growing anger flooded as he could no longer feel the pain and the blood from his injuries. Ignoring his entire environment but the old man before him, the wild child rushed to him, attempting to claw and bite him to nothingness. If he was going to be an Angel of Death, he might as well bring death to his despicable creator that brought him life.

A blending of bliss and horror running through, Garland could feel the rising raw and even spiritual strength coursing through the young angel. It was surpassing any of the creatures he knew of Gaia in both physical and spiritual power and even from his past life with his Terran creators. Everything else he knew had been nothing compared to this tiny prodigy. In Trance, Zidane was a creature beyond compare, one with the potential to destroy everything.

Like destroying his creator, all by himself.

But Garland was not ready to surrender his life. Catching the feral boy in Trance with his wide hands, Garland tried squeezing him between his

palms to incapacitate him into doing anything else. However, with the rising strength, Zidane succeeded to push the fingers away. Freeing himself from Garland's grip, Zidane crept to his face again like a sucking parasite, attempting to claw the man's eyes out.

As a last resort, Garland projected a Sleep spell on the boy, hoping it'd do the job.

It did not.

Zidane's power was at its peak now, Garland sensed it. The child was still filled with pure, ecstatic energy needed to be wasted on his worst enemy. No ailment magic will affect him. Only pure strength will stop the feral beast from turning his master into a mess of metallic chaos.

Even in Trance, four years of life was not enough to reach its full potential to defeat the millennium man Zidane hated so much. No more worried to injure his precious angel, Garland gripped to the child by his tail, which caught the young boy by shock. Despite having trained his tail, it was not enough to escape his master's grasp. Pulling the child out of his face, the old man launched Zidane hard to the glass shatters on the ground, close to where his unconscious brother was lying.

The landing had been so violent on the child that it left him knocked out. The glow of his body vanished, and Zidane returned to his regular form, losing his Trance power.

At last, Garland could breathe easy.

With both brothers lost in dreamland, Garland was now allowed moments to admire his marvelous, crafted genetic work. Zidane was truly the perfect Angel of Death he had envisioned, even beyond his own calculating expectations. Indeed, his young creation had successfully developed the emotional experiences he needed to ascend Trance. The emotional response from the fear of losing his only loved one, the failed prototype Kuja, had truly provoked the power to surge out.

If another event of this sort would happen again years later, when the perfect creation will develop into his full potential, Garland could not imagine the possibilities.

All these affections and love, concepts that Garland could never fully comprehend, were needed for their purposes. The brothers shared these concepts between them. Both angels must be used for his plan. Zidane got all emotional depending of Kuja’s condition and presence. Kuja was the only

one who could control Zidane without the use of any controlling device. Zidane needed Kuja as his sole caregiver. They had to work together to bring death upon Gaia. Together, their potential for conquest and destruction will become infinite.

Kuja was the key to initiate Zidane's Trance.

Yes, on a technical point of view, Kuja was a defect, a failed prototype. However, to one innocent child's eyes, Kuja was his sole family, his dear brother. Zidane had no concept of failure or success. There were only creatures to love or to hate, and Kuja was currently the only one capable of providing him the love a child needed to develop his core.

Because Zidane needed Kuja, the failure will get to keep his soul. Even if Garland knew it will be impossible for Kuja to always obey him, unless for his own convenience, he knew Zidane's naivety might drive him to follow Kuja always. The silver-haired angel's dream to become an all-powerful being will guide him to become a ruler of countries and worlds which will lead to war. Zidane will agree to all this, thus bringing more deaths on their tolls.

A strange satisfaction ran through his core. Garland could not be happier that everything seemed

to go as planned so far. Only some more manipulative ways from his part to shove onto his two special Genome siblings, and his days to see Terra's return to glory will be coming soon.

He had to learn to be more patient for the next years.

"Wh… What happened…?"

Why was there a fog blocking his memories and thoughts? How was this so hard to think through why he was slumping lazily on the ground in a pose so stiff and strange each muscle of his body hurt? Kuja shook his head and rubbed his eyes, struggling to see where he was. When the blur of his vision turned clear and sharp, he could see himself sitting on one of these pod platforms found in Bran Bal with which they tended to sick Genomes or from where they were all born. However, this place did not look much like the Bran Bal he was so familiar with. Whether his hometown bathed in the painful blue light from above, this hot, burning place appeared like hell in all its crimson splendor.

He had only been there once before. He was in Pandemonium.

What was he doing in Pandemonium? Wasn't this the area where all the Terran souls, beside his and his brother's, were kept in stasis until Terra's crystal will revive to its full strength? And why were there so many Genomes around busy cleaning the remaining mess on the ground? What happened and why didn't Kuja get to witness anything that had occurred before? Wasn't he in the Invincible earlier?

Then an image flashed in his mind.

A panicking, crying Zidane staring at him.

Wait a minute. His plan to send his brother on Gaia… Garland… Zidane…!

"Where's Zidane?" Kuja uttered as he caught the arm of the Genome closest to him.

Barely alarmed by Kuja's move, the Genome turned to him, aware of being addressed. Gazing at the angel for a moment with his blank glare, the vessel turned his vision back farther away behind Kuja where he pointed toward a group of Genomes gathered around a point of interest. Readying his impassive voice as Kuja turned around, he said, "Zidane is over there. Our siblings are tending to his injuries."

Shocked by the comment, Kuja shook the Genome by the shoulders. “Injuries? What happened to Zidane?”

The soulless Genome’s voice was devoid of emotion, not the least concerned of his potential savior. “Zidane has sustained injuries from Master Garland after he has attacked him.”

This was even more shocking. “What?” Kuja uttered, shaking his head in confusion. “Why did Zidane attack Master Garland?”

“Master Garland told us Zidane was protecting you from him.”

Such a blunt, direct answer, but this answer was enough to satisfy his curiosity.

Zidane was… protecting him. Kuja was not certain how he should take this. Whatever happened to trigger that rage and courage in this tiny boy, Kuja couldn’t help but feel a rising anger in his heart. At the same time, a growing warmth soothed the pain of his heart, appeasing his soul from wanting to rip apart their creator for having done something to his brother, if something did happen.

But there he was, a completely helpless twelve-year-old angel in the body of a young adult man

protected by a small child who had barely reached his fourth year. Was he truly a failure as Garland had claimed when he could not even protect himself while a child could?

He recalled everything now, the incident that probably had led Zidane to attack their master. Thanks to Kuja's insolence, Garland was going to get his soul back and turn him into an empty vessel like the others. He could not remember how he lost consciousness or how he ended up in Pandemonium, but he was reminded of hearing Zidane screaming his name endlessly, fearing to lose his big brother and sole caregiver. For certain, Zidane had gotten no help, with all the other passive Genomes who could do nothing but obey their creator.

How did Zidane manage to protect him… no, save him from Garland, the unconquerable, all-feared Master of Terra of five thousand years?

Had Kuja underestimated Zidane's strength, once again?

No, he had to draw his concern over something else than his own pathetic failure. Kuja stood back and dashed to the Genomes' gathering, tossing them away to check on his brother. With the compliant Genomes stepping aside, when Kuja saw the ground,

his heart formed into an aching knot. Zidane's unconscious body lied on the floor, bruised across each part of his body that had been cleaned by their soulless siblings. The child's head, arms, legs and even tail were covered with tight bandages that featured stains of blood and dust.

Thanks goodness, Zidane was going to be okay. Kuja could rest easy now.

Kneeling over the body, Kuja wrapped Zidane between his arms, the same arms the boy had been so familiar with, where he would normally find comfort and peace. Careful to not wake him as the last thing Kuja needed was to hear his annoying, loud bawls, he replaced the child to cradle him and he casted a Curaga magic. Thankfully, Zidane remained in slumber.

"… Sleep well, Zidane."

Indeed. Kuja just attained a new level of confidence now. Aware of Zidane's blind faith in his brother, Kuja knew the boy will trust him with anything, because Zidane trusted Kuja to his fullest. This child's loyalty was beyond recognition and he will always follow his elder brother, no matter what.

Together, they will be Garland's enemies.

“This child’s grand affinity with you is beyond my expectations.”

Normally, when he’d hear Garland’s voice from behind, Kuja’s hairs on his tail would rise with dread. However, this time, he was not afraid. He could hear the anger in his master’s voice, and yet, he knew there was no intention for harm. That comment twisted into a compliment beneath and Kuja couldn’t stop that smile from appearing on his lips. “My, thank you so much, Master Garland,” he said, mocking the old man. After all, Zidane’s affinities for his brother were the fruits of Kuja’s efforts alone.

“Humph,” Garland huffed from behind, not bothered to reach his creation’s field on vision, seeing Kuja was not even looking back. The young Genome appeared too busy rocking the child brother. “This affinity is the only reason I have a change of mind. I am letting you keep your soul. You will continue to raise Zidane under your wing. He will be a fitting angel under your influence, however you think will be good for him. You will achieve your goal as Angels of Death, together.”

Garland could hear the sigh from Kuja, so he was aware the young man paid attention. The old man

continued his speech. “However, because of the incident earlier, I will not tolerate your insolence anymore. You will no longer be allowed to roam freely between Terra and Gaia. You and Zidane will live on Gaia to carry out your purpose and you will bring death to it, let it be with a war or a destruction. As long as we can get Terra’s crystal assimilate Gaia’s crystal.”

“Marvelous! It is not like I long to remain in this dull, boring place,” Kuja responded with a calm chuckle. “And with what occurred just now, I cannot fathom how your precious, perfect Zidane will want to stay here either. This little brat probably does not wish to see you anymore, so banishing us on Gaia will lead everyone to happiness, am I right?”

Ignoring the tease from the young man and never changing his tone, Garland added, “You will leave in one week. Until then, be sure to make proper preparations.”

The next day, when Kuja gathered his supply for his permanent trip to Gaia, he came to check upon his brother on his bed.

The child was still sound asleep.

Since yesterday, Kuja had noted the progresses Zidane made during his recovery. He continued to cast more Cure spells on him, hoping it will wake the child faster, noting that Zidane had already recovered from his injuries when his bandages were removed. All that remained for him was to wake up and bear the good news that they will no longer be coming back to the home planet they hated.

It was a funny thought, knowing that Zidane would always be disappointed whenever they had to return to Terra after a trip from Gaia. It was clear the boy wanted to make Gaia their new home, and Kuja was not against the idea either.

At least Zidane will be okay, but his slumber had been lasting more than a day and it was getting a little worrisome. A memory of his past suddenly flashed back, with Garland beating him when a very exhausted Kuja had casted a Sleep spell on Zidane to get some recuperating sleep for himself, nearly killing the boy.

And then, Kuja realized that his master had casted that same darn spell on Zidane. It must have hit him harder, being a mere child. With his young brother being older now since that incident, Zidane was probably developed enough to be able to go on

without sustenance for few days in his sleep. At the very least, Zidane will wake up a little weaker, but definitely okay.

Still, if only Garland could be punished for having shoved the very same pain on Zidane as Kuja did years ago, which had ended with Kuja being punished for it.

Nevertheless, being banished on Gaia will buy him time. With Garland too far to guess Kuja's plan to overthrow him, his next years will be crucial to concoct something against their creator. For now, even if he'd team up with Zidane, he could not take on Garland, that all-powerful bastard with five thousand years of combat experience. Yet, that old organic android must have his limits and he must have reached that limit centuries ago. Thanks to this limit, Kuja and Zidane will acquire the coveted experience on Gaia. Together, they will be strong enough to kill the man they despised so much.

And when this will happen, they will be freed of Garland's control. Kuja will rule the worlds, both Terra and Gaia. With everything they had to endure, he had no care what the others will think of him as a ruler, as their masters. If everything went well, perhaps Kuja himself will be a better ruler than

Garland and whoever ruled over Gaia. Sentient races will see him as a god, a true Angel of Death.

This was a dream to hold on to. It will keep him going.

And, as for Zidane…

As long as Kuja maintained the trust and bond between them, Zidane will listen to him. By keeping him tame, Zidane will never rebel against his older brother. After all, providing Zidane proper health care might have been difficult through his four years, but giving him love was as easy as pea. Zidane's presence might have been the only great thing Garland had ever created, and the boy had the same, if better power potential that Kuja possessed.

For this, he had to be careful.

Ah, what should he do when he'll rule the worlds? The thought offered him some thrilling rushes.

A sound behind him stirred him away from his reverie for world domination. The entrance door burst open in his small home where the man he despised stood. The sight of him disgusted him so much that as soon as his eyes were set on him, Kuja turned his back at him, staying to his bed where

Zidane was sleeping. “He’s still asleep,” Kuja said when he brushed a hand on his brother’s cheek. “Are you coming to laugh at our misery?”

“It is not my intention,” Garland responded, oddly enough, with a very neutral tone. “I have come here to share you with the information of a new feature that I will give you both. It will be a power that will allow you to communicate with each other without the need of physical devices.”

Kuja chuckled. “What if I say no?”

“I will still input that power in you two, whether you like it or not.”

Truth be told, while Kuja was giving out laugh out of mockery at the old man, deep within, he was still outraged that he will never be truly freed until he could get rid of his master for good. One more reason to justify Garland’s death. “I see, so you are giving us no choice,” the silver-haired Genome whispered to himself before he finally turned over, expressing the best of his sadistic smiles. “Then please, Master! Enlighten me about what this ‘new feature for communicating’ exactly consists of so I can get a delicious foretaste of what you are going to shove into us!”

Garland remained calm over his angel's attitude. "This feature will allow you two, as Angels of Death, to communicate with each other with telepathy without the need to speak out loud your words, regardless of the distance between you two. Do not worry about the privacy between you both as you will be able to block your thoughts from being read by the other. This will be a useful feature to input to your settings. If one gets lost or is too far, you will be able to tell with your connected minds where you are. This will allow you to keep your plans a secret from the Gaians, if it ever comes to that."

There was one fact Kuja was certain about Garland and it was the man's inability to lie. That was right. Garland, that all supreme, powerful being of Terra, despite his powers over all the creatures of his home planet, had been created piece by piece by the ancient Terrans to fulfill his destiny as Terra's savior. One of the inputs the extinct Terrans had programmed into him was that when Garland was certain of a fact, he must always tell the truth and never lie. If Garland had let him know of this magic feature he intended on giving them, then Kuja trusted this will be exactly what he will be getting.

Once again, this will be another great convenience for him. Being able to communicate by telepathy sounded intriguing, but he was not sure if Zidane will appreciate this. Whatever, he will have to accept it.

Standing back on his feet with his young brother in his arms, Kuja gave him some pats on the back before he walked to his master, now ready for anything. “Fine, show me the way, O Master Garland!” Kuja hummed out, putting an odd emphasis on the word “master”. Garland did not like his attitude, but he will have to bear it until few more days.

In the basement laboratory, the equipment and settings were ready to be used with few other Genomes waiting for their arrivals. One of the vessels indicated Kuja to stand on one of the pod platforms, where he will be enclosed inside a glass tank. The thought of being inside them had always brought him some fear, but he trusted that nothing bad will happen, except for being given that power to him. As there was only one available tank right now, Kuja had to offer the sleeping Zidane to Garland’s arms before he stepped on the platform.

As Kuja waited for the process to begin, the glass tube enclosed him in before cables and needles came to crawl under his skin. When the water began to fill the tank, his lids grew heavy, and soon, he lost consciousness without worrying as he knew this was part of the process. Only few minutes went by when Kuja woke up on the platform, still wet from the process of receiving the power.

Strange, he didn’t feel any different and Garland could tell the same by looking into Kuja’s puzzled expression. “You will notice the difference when Zidane will receive this feature too,” Garland reassured him.

His deep, loud voice snapped Zidane away from his cursed slumber. Exhausted after such a long sleep, the child lazily moved his limbs, realizing he had been asleep against someone’s body for some time. Blinking until the blur of his vision turned sharper, he gave away few tired moans and long yawns before he attempted to sleep again. He brushed his face against the man’s chest until he grasped at the bright red light and the cold surface of this dark metallic armor.

These were not Kuja’s arms and chest. When he looked up, he saw him. He saw the mean old man.

Zidane snarled and growled at him.

“Zidane, it’s okay,” the older brother hushed to Zidane as Kuja walked to his master who was still holding the child. Thankfully, Kuja’s soft voice came with the desired effect of appeasing the boy. Zidane suppressed his growls but his furrowed brows hinting his anger at Garland remained. “Master Garland will not hurt you. He is going to add you a new power and the process will not hurt you.”

The boy did not make out much of what he had been told. However, he knew everything will go well when Kuja came to pick him from Garland, to which Zidane did not protest. He put the child on the platform and pet him on the head, making himself reassuring with a warm smile, the kind he’d only give to his brother. It worked to lay off the worry on Zidane’s face.

“Master Garland will modify you a little bit so we can speak with each other with our mind, okay?” Kuja hushed to the kid, and Zidane listened. “It will not hurt you and you will like this, I am sure of this.”

The glass tank enclosed the boy, now separating him from his big brother and the rest of the world.

Panic began to take place, but Kuja waited close to him with his palms on the glass. Trying to show how brave he was, Zidane put his palms where Kuja put his. The warm smile on Kuja's lips brought so much comfort to him that Zidane had never noticed the needles piercing him before he went to slumber.

Minutes later, when Zidane woke up after the power transfer, it was now time to test this new feature. As Zidane had no clue what happened, Kuja will have to initiate the process.

"***Zidane, you hear me, right?***"

By judging Zidane's reaction to this attempt, Kuja knew this was working perfectly. Seemingly shocked, Zidane gave Kuja a glare of confusion, never stopping to frown and blink at him. Now, the only thing that lacked was for Zidane to test this newly gained power himself. "Y-Yes?" the boy stuttered in confusion.

"***Okay, now, try to say 'Yes' in your head as if you speak to me.***"

Unable to grasp the reason why Kuja wanted this, Zidane tried to follow whatever his brother meant.

"***Yes.***"

This was a good start. Garland had given them exactly what he advertised, and Kuja felt like this will go better and better from now on. When it took Zidane longer to understand the concept, both brothers spent the rest of the day to practice this new feature. Kuja was able to master it after few hours, but Zidane felt it was more like a game rather than a feature, not aware that this will be a permanent power that will follow them the rest of their living existence.

He will get used to it, eventually.

Days later, the day before they were set to leave Terra for good, another surprise came to the brothers when Garland arrived in their room. Before the old man could even make his first step in, Zidane hissed at him. Each time, this feral reaction amused Kuja. It was so ironic for Garland to put so much faith into his most precious creation that utterly loathed him.

Garland learned to stop being irritated by this startling reaction over time. Yet, he was shocked when Zidane's growls were immediately dropped when the child spotted something shifting under Garland's arms. That thing looked like a moving ball of silver fur, like a big version of Kuja's tail.

And he was enthralled by it.

“You are going to need this,” Garland said as he offered the moving thing from his arms, laying it on the ground before the brothers. Kuja was in slight shock when he recognized the creature as a Silver Dragon hatchling. “As it can fly, it will provide you transportation and protection on Gaia, if it ever comes to that. Gaia is an immense planet beyond the Outer Continent’s size, after all.”

“My, how unusually generous of you, Master,” Kuja commented with a grin, the shock on his face now gone. “Why so many goodbye gifts in such a short period of time?”

“It is for your convenience, that is all,” the old man replied with a blunt tone. “A Silver Dragon can fly for long hours and does not require a lot of care. They grow up fast and have great lifespans. If I need you to carry on with your purpose as successfully as possible, I must provide you with the most proper resources available.”

Not bothering to listen to their discussion, Zidane set his eyes on the dragon for an instant. The small furred creature opened its eyes, staring back at the Genome child before it let out tiny shrieks. Instincts kicking in again, the child crouched into his attacking stance, ready to tear this monster apart.

“No!” Kuja shouted and Zidane jumped with fright, not having expected his brother to scream at him. “This Silver Dragon is our friend, so you better be nice with it.”

A new friend? Did Kuja already call it a friend?

How strange. Since the day he became aware of the world and his own existence, Kuja had never taken anyone or anything for granted friends. It even had taken him some times to fully accept Zidane as a part of his loved ones, a bond that had needed months from developing together. Calling this creature a friend before he even got to interact with it was still a new notion to him, and somehow, he felt good about it.

If only they could have done the same with everything they had met.

Kuja caught the hatchling in his arms and Zidane came to join them, both giving a stare of amazement at the creature. Now with Kuja calling it a friend, Zidane began to brush his fingers over the fur on its cheeks, prompting it to purr and lick Zidane’s hands.

To Kuja’s pleased awe, Zidane laughed and petted the dragon, now craving for its affection.

Leaving them alone to get used to the hatchling's company, Garland closed the door behind him.

With Garland out of the way and with only the three of them together, whether they were Genomes or Silver Dragon, their last day on Terra won't be as boring.

Author's note*: I've always thought that the Silver Dragons were initially Garland's creations because of the way they disappear when you kill them. But unlike the soulless Genomes, they can reproduce and all and that they have one that acts as a Queen, which is the Nova Dragon. Garland probably sets them free around the Iifa Tree, so that's why you see many of them when the party goes to Memoria.*

Also, is it just me, or the Silver Dragons' design is the perfection for a legendary Pokémon? I feel like they'd make a great Ghost/Dragon type.

Chapter 5: Sorry

I probably made Kuja too caring in this fic, but I feel like he'd be a more caring man if he wasn't alone like in the game.

As usual, thanks for reviews!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 5: Sorry

This was it, their last day on Terra.

Before the two brothers and their new dragon hatchling were teleported away on Gaia, Garland ordered his soulless Genomes to refrain from taking commands of the teleportation control device for now. When he did, he walked closer to the trio, with Kuja giving their master a long glare and Zidane hiding behind his brother's legs while giving out a low, continuous growl at the man.

"What are you waiting for, O Master Garland? Are you prolonging our stay here because you are going to miss us?" Kuja hummed his usual mocking melody to Garland. Confused, Zidane shut his

growls and stared at his brother instead, blinking and pulling his arm gently. It had become Kuja's new routine to hum like this whenever he spoke to the old man.

Of course, Garland ignored the tease. "Before I send you, I need to inform you that you will not be able to board the Invincible, but I have reprogrammed it so you will be able to control its destructive powers remotely with your newly acquired communication feature."

"Oh? Destructive powers?" Kuja commented with a giggle. "If it possesses such destructive powers, why did you even bother to create two Angels of Death to commence a war? Can you not simply use the Invincible to destroy all lives on Gaia and be done with it? This is five thousand years of efforts for naught!"

Garland shrugged off the comment. "The Invincible does not have unlimited powers. It can control spirits and destroy entire towns, but abusing too much of its power will require it to be recharged for long years."

The smile on Kuja's lips spread into a grin. "So, basically, your ancient masters' 'perfect' technology is flawed."

“Can’t you just shut your mouth sometimes?!”

Satisfied, Kuja let out a sudden laugh, even frightening Zidane who had no idea what went through his brother. “Okay, okay,” the silver-haired young man exclaimed after calming himself. “You are lending us the Invincible and its control but we cannot board it. Right. It does not matter. We will have Mahila to fly around, anyway.”

Garland questioned the new word. “Ma… hila?”

“The Silver Dragon you generously offered us,” Kuja answered. “You should know it better than I do, having known the ancient Terrans. ‘Mahila’ means ‘Lady’ in Terran. She is being a good girl to us, so she deserves an equally good name. We might as well call her the third Angel of Death.”

“Enough, it is time for you to leave Terra and get to Gaia. Our fate is in your hands.”

With this, Garland ordered the Genomes behind him to press the buttons, initiating the teleportation process. They vanished from the teleport pods, never to come on Terra again.

Humph, not even a goodbye, Kuja thought. Not that it mattered much to him at this point. They were

going to be partly freed from Garland's grasp and that was all they needed.

It was time to formulate his plan for world domination.

…

Their first week wandering on the Outer Continent had not been very fruitful to them. They did not find a place they could call home yet and their old Moogle tent began to show signs of deterioration, with holes in the fabric and insects crawling inside their only shelter. All became worse with the rain pouring down on them at nights. It did not matter much for Zidane nor Mahila when they both did not mind to sleep exposed to the wilderness, but feeling more delicate and akin to his own appearance, Kuja never seemed to get used to it.

And speaking of his brother, Kuja initially dreaded the relation between Zidane and their Silver Dragon hatchling. Being forced to stay together for a week had taught Zidane few things, mainly that he should not attack anything. He learned the concept of compassion and how to stay calm in the presence of others that were not considered enemies. Like the Genome brothers, Mahila had the instinctive

tendency to show her affection by cuddling with them and they returned the move. Their exchanges had reinforced the bond between them, which will certainly become a convenience for them all.

With their strong bond growing, they all fought together against the wild of Gaia, protecting each other from dangers and feasting on their preys. This was going all great so far.

But despite all the good things, Kuja still wished for a true home where they will settle together.

Back on Terra, Garland had lent Kuja an old holographic map of the Outer Continent where he had marked a dot of light over what looked like a desert region. According to their master, few ancient Terran structures had left marks on Gaia after the two planets' failed fusion, five thousand years ago. That dot on his map was one of the hidden Terran palaces. Being located in a hot desert didn't appeal to Kuja, but it appeared much better than having no home at all.

As they continued to walk through the mountains and bare plains of the Outer Continent, fighting all preys and monsters on their way, they finally reached the desert. From there, they will need to

walk few more days. Kuja gave away a sigh of exhaustion.

Thankfully, the tasteless synthetic food they had collected from Terra were supplying them with enough sustenance to cross the desert without having to find water and food. And even better, Mahila had gained strength and volume in a short time just as Garland had assured them. While her wings were obviously too weak to offer her the ability of flight, at least, she could bear the light weight of Zidane on her back without too much effort. This will allow them a faster travel as Zidane, even with his seemingly endless stamina and even as Garland's "perfect" angel, was still a child in need of constant naps. Even with Kuja's slower steps, Zidane could not walk as far as Kuja was capable of in the long run.

On their third day after they had reached the desert for the first time, they discovered a wide and tall grotto in the middle of a small mountain range. If Kuja had correctly followed the map Garland had given him, then they had reached their destination. Around this grotto, there should be some kind of Terran structure hidden around or beneath. They will soon be able to rest for a long while. What a relief.

Getting off Mahila fast, Zidane was the first to venture further into the grotto to give this place some exploration. His young curiosity won over his patience to find new treasures and creatures in this unknown territory. Kuja trusted his brother will not get lost or disappear, especially with their new telepathy feature Garland had offered them, both having mastered the power now.

"***Don't go too far. Don't leave my field of vision,***" Kuja told Zidane with their connected minds.

"***Yes!***" Zidane answered right away.

Somehow, this was kind of amusing that they could sense the emotions of the other in their telepathic link as if they were truly hearing the voices but without the use of their mouth. At first, the experience was strange, but now, it was as natural as speaking out loud. Even reverting from either way of communicating with each other had become easy. However, with his natural short attention span, Zidane had harder moments speaking in his mind and doing something else at the same time.

Only a minute elapsed that Zidane called his brother again.

“***Kuja! Kuja!***”

“***Hey, Zidane, did you find something interesting?***”

“***Yes!***”

Yet, Zidane still spoke only three words in their connected minds…

With Mahila following behind, Kuja led the dragon’s way to the only path deeper to the grotto, where Zidane had run off. The young man and their growing hatchling walked around a set of stairs before finding Zidane on the ground, standing before a dead-end with some carved and painted shapes around. Kuja recognized the designs as of Terran origins, so Garland had been right about this place belonging to their ancient civilization.

Kuja inspected the surrounding, trying to find a functioning device or anything. These appeared like these teleportation pods found on Terra, mainly in Pandemonium and the Invincible, so there must be a way to reactivate them after long years of inactivity. After few minutes of search, he found a button which he pushed, and the patterns began to glow.

Making himself reassuring when he saw that Zidane and Mahila were swept by panic with all the

lights around them, he brought them with him in the middle of the circle pattern. As a flash of light surrounded them, they were lifted away to another area.

They appeared in a completely dark area.

And this time, Kuja panicked.

He was suddenly reminded of that dark room that Garland would push him in, all alone, whenever he felt like his angel had been too insolent.

Wait a minute. This was no Terra here. They were on Gaia, out of Garland's reach and power. This could not be the same dark room as the tiny one on Terra. There probably was no anti-magic field in here either.

In the blink of an eye, Kuja made use of a basic Fire spell, which came to him like a breeze. Both brothers found themselves amazed inside a sort of wide hall with fine works of arts, very much like the well-crafted structures Kuja had seen in Conde Petie and Madain Sari. Despite the permanent, very hot weather outside this palace, this area was filled with enough comforting fresh air.

Yes, this palace in the desert will be their new home. It was about time they found a permanent

shelter, with their now unusable Moogle tent.

The following week was spent to explore this grand palace which had been inhabited by several monsters and pests that had made this place home, with no master to claim this area as theirs. Of course, with the palace being of Terran origins, Kuja claimed the right to remove all these creatures from their new home. Thankfully, the brothers had no problem fighting these pests together. Besides, they cooked delicious meats from these monsters.

To Kuja's pleased shock, they discovered few rooms full of old but intact books, mostly about the science and nature of the ancient Terrans and other fictional and real Terran tales, from romance to humor and adventures to dramas. From what Garland had taught him, except for their technological advancements, the Terrans were not so different from the Gaians in their social structures and cultures.

Reading about the Terran culture should help him to plan ideas for a global war or anything else that could wipe out lives on Gaia. Whenever he took his sweet time reading some of these books, Zidane enjoyed spending his days playing fight with Mahila.

Speaking of the Silver Dragon, after a month, she attained the built of a full-grown dragon, but being a mere adolescent in dragon growth, she was smaller than an adult. Flight was an ability she still lacked as her wings were too weak and small to allow her to propel in the air, but she was able to bear the weight of both Genomes at the same time now. Only few more months will be needed before she will be an adult.

Well, it should be about time for Zidane to focus on books too. While he could not speak much than his default three words of Kuja, Yes and No, strangely enough, Zidane was capable of writing and spelling all letters. Once, he surprised his brother when he showed him a paper where he had written his own name and Kuja's.

Unfortunately for Kuja, Zidane was not too keen on reading, and reading was necessary to learn magic.

Oh well, too bad. Zidane probably had very few to no potential for magic. Perhaps this was how Garland had intended him to be…

“***Kuja, Zidane, I am hoping you have not forgotten about the purpose of your stay on Gaia.***”

The voice had come so abruptly it threw both brothers out of their sleep like a nightmare creeping into their mind. Kuja arose his body from his bed while Zidane was pushed away to the side by the move, finding himself thrown on the floor in a rude awakening. With their hearts pumping into faster beats, they held their chests with a pang of pain. Kuja felt he was going to get a cardiac arrest that he thought to see death at his door.

But this was no cardiac arrest nor death. These were shock and fear.

Confused by the voice he just heard, Zidane jumped all around, trying to find the origin of the voice that woke them. The voice was familiar, yet distant, one that he wished to forget, one he hated without being certain why anymore. However, Kuja remained quiet, frozen to his bed with a startling realization. When Zidane spotted the expression of terror on his brother’s face, the boy calmed himself before he coveted the warmth from him. Wanting to soothe his distress, Zidane crawled himself under Kuja’s arms, hugging him.

“***What?***” Zidane asked, using their linked minds.

After several months since their banishment from Terra, even in dire, dark times like these, Kuja was always glad to hear the fruits of his efforts. Zidane had made few progresses of adding more words to his vocabulary. Hearing these new words, whenever they were short, one-syllable words, brought some warmth to his heart.

Zidane's evolution was a happy, yet sad reminder that Kuja was not alone in this unfair fate as puppets of Terra.

That old voice boiled the rage burning inside him.

Garland, how could he…?

Trying to remain stoic and cool, Kuja said, "***You never told us that you were part of that 'little feature of connected minds' you gave us, Master Garland. Were you lying to us?***"

"***You know as much as I do that I cannot lie to you,***" Garland revealed, not concerned by his servant's despair. "***I have decided to add this feature to myself shortly after your departure from Terra. I have never told you of my plan to link my mind with yours for our convenience.***"

Furious, Kuja turned his hands into shaking fists. "***You damn robot…***"

"***If you worry that I will bother you all the time, fear not. I am simply reminding you of your mission when I feel like you will stray away from your life purpose.***"

So, you are not giving us any freedom at all, Kuja thought as he shook his body with a low growl.

Unable to bear more of that deep voice in his head, Zidane bounced off his brother's arms and landed on the floor, growling and snarling like a feral beast at the bad entity he'd been trying to search and tear apart. The poor boy had no idea what was happening, and of course, Garland was safe from where he stood.

But watching Zidane acting in a wild rage at the voice still offered some reassurance to Kuja. While he pitied the boy, he was glad Zidane's hatred for Garland had not subdued from their master's lack of presence over the months.

Without being sure why, Kuja laughed at the old man, catching Zidane's attention and prompting him to freeze while he stared at Kuja in confusion. "***I don't think Zidane remembers you much,***" the

older Genome added with a smile. "***Even if he does, he probably does not want to remember you. Few months to a young child are a very long time, and you know how his short attention span and his legendary constant distracted mind make it very easy for him to forget about the more unimportant things like his creator.***"

It was at this moment Kuja cursed their telepathic power when he was able to sense Garland's satisfaction. The young man hated to experience his master's happiness with his following comment. "***Nevertheless, he will lead Terra to a new era of rebirth, that, I can assure you.***"

And with it, they no longer felt the presence of their master in their connections. This was a heavy weight off their shoulders. Relieved, Zidane sighed and walked back to his brother, only to pout with worry when he grasped Kuja's distress that had taken place of his former smile.

"What, Kuja?" Zidane asked his sibling, staring at him with wide, puppy eyes.

Giving a guilty gaze at the younger brother, Kuja slowly shook his head before laying his hand on the child's head. "Zidane, I… I'm so sorry," he whispered to his brother, his voice low in despair. "If

only… I knew Master Garland's scheme in this, I would have never let you to be subjected to this experiment. It is such a horrifying experience to be damned to hear your creator's voice in your mind for the rest of your life, for him to remind you that you are forever his, that you are never truly free from your fate."

Lending him another set of wide, innocent eyes, Zidane stared at Kuja in disarray. He did not understand the grave prospect of Kuja's words. It was too much for a child so young to comprehend.

But the only thing a child that young needed to understand was his older brother's sadness. Kuja was sad and Zidane felt sad too. To toss that sadness away from him, Zidane formed a big silly grin, all in an attempt to give Kuja his smile again.

To the boy's joy, his plan succeeded. Kuja offered him a weak, yet relieved smile with a gentle chuckle.

"Thank you, Zidane, for your existence."

Few months ago, Zidane had attained his fifth year of life.

Experiencing his life on Gaia for more than a year had been quite fruitful to the boy's development in term of strength and general knowledge. Now, he was capable of holding short but complete conversations with Kuja and he learned how to read, write and count perfectly. While his grammar and speech were to be desired, his progresses when given his past years into consideration were spectacular.

And like Zidane, Mahila had developed well, except into a full-fledged flying adult Silver Dragon. Unfortunately for Zidane, the size of their dragon friend did not allow the child to play fight with her anymore as they had used to, but they still maintained their bond tight with snuggles and cuddles.

The only downside with this Genomes and dragon's relationship was having a dragon friend bringing a newly killed prey to their home every day. Sometimes, Kuja would borrow parts of the prey's meat to get it cooked and eaten, but Mahila was usually left eating the prey alone.

Now with a permanent flying element available, Kuja believed they were both ready to explore the rest of the Outer Continent. Kuja was not made

aware of any sentient civilizations other than the Dwarves of Conde Petie and the Humans of Madain Sari, but he hoped to meet more on other continents. For now, Garland requested them to remain on this bare continent to start smooth, for Zidane's sake.

It was such a shame for Kuja to follow with Garland's plan to start a war and thus destroy all these Gaian creatures one day. Going with Garland's orders was the only way for him to keep his soul long enough to overthrow his master later, even if it will take years.

Having to visit the towns meant they had to leave their Silver Dragon outside, further away from the sentient creatures to not alert them into panic. After all, there were roaming wild Silver Dragons around the Iifa Tree and they were known as aggressive monsters by the locals, though attacks were rare.

Because of their more pacifist ways, Kuja brought Zidane to the Dwarves first. However, the older Genome was shocked with the results of their meeting.

Initially, Zidane growled at the sight of them. Yet, after realizing how the Dwarves became friendly with them on first sight and thinking they were no real threat to them, the boy started to smile and

sought to meet and speak with them. These Dwarves were so much more interesting than anything else Zidane had met in his life so far. After all, his world used to be filled with empty vessels and enemies. Instead of hating them, Zidane had even begun to try imitating them with their cultural greeting, something like “Rally-Ho!” with a very lively tone which Kuja felt too ashamed to even try.

From the Dwarves, they learned of a new cultural concept that was widespread to Gaia and quite unfamiliar from the Terran culture, a concept called “marriage”, which was the union of two lovers for reproduction purpose. At least this was what Kuja gathered. From the ancient books describing the Terran civilization, no such thing had existed as lovers would simply stay together without any kind of celebrated “marriage” and reproduce without culture imposed on them. Reproduction was an amazing notion to Kuja at first as Genomes like him and Zidane were created via complete artificial means without any biological intervention. He realized his kin were the odd ones.

The first time Kuja had witnessed reproduction in the wild of Gaia, he had asked about it to Garland who revealed that Genomes, including Kuja himself, were granted with functional reproductive organs.

They were capable of procreating, but without any sexual drive to lead them, none of the existing Genomes were created by natural methods so far. Besides, Garland was already creating them over time, so there was no need to reproduce. Because he had been created an adult without any physical development, Kuja knew he had not been provided any sexual drive either as these assets should develop during adolescence.

However, he might have to check Zidane in his later life…

Yet, he could not grasp the concept of marriage well. If people were driven by sexual desires as they grew, then why waiting for marriage for the act? Perhaps meeting with more Gaians will allow him to get the better idea, but if the intelligent creatures of Gaia loved the concept that was now anchored to their culture, he'll have to accept this. Anything about Gaian culture could be useful to fulfill his goals.

For reasons he could not comprehend, the Dwarves only allowed married couple to visit their "Sanctuary", which actually was the Iifa Tree itself. Not that it mattered when Kuja and Zidane merely crossed the mountain path to the Sanctuary by the

air with their dragon friend. No one on Gaia seemed to know of the tree's true purpose as they were praising it as a kind of monument, a wonder of nature. Considering its size and its structure, it was no wonder the Gaians saw the tree as a natural chef-d'oeuvre.

Noticing how friendly Zidane had become with the Dwarves over time, Kuja decided it was wiser to not visit their town anytime soon, fearing to see him soften to the Gaians too much. After all, at five, children like Zidane were malleable. The boy needed to be reminded that the Dwarves were Gaians, and thus their enemies. Perhaps he was not ready to meet with the Humans who Kuja knew to be viler and more corrupted, hypothetically making them easier for Zidane to not trust them at first, unlike the innocent and joyful Dwarves.

Kuja thought to come back in Conde Petie years later to wipe them out when the boy will forget about their kindness.

With the Iifa Tree now available for exploration thanks to Mahila, the brothers descended in the depth of the roots where they met the creature named Soulcage, the soul divider. The undead beast was responsible for the creation of the Mist on Gaia,

a manifestation of the Gaian souls that could not return to the planet's crystal to provide it with their memories and thus they were lost on the planet's cycle. Stopping the cycle of souls on Gaia allowed Gaia's spirit energy to turn into Terran energy. Thanks to the Mist over the past centuries, the population on the planet was disrupted, creating wars and monsters, thus disposing of the Gaian lives faster to allow Terra's revival. However, since the creation of the airships fueled by the Mist, global wars had been put to a stop and the cycle of souls had returned to normal.

And this was why Garland had created Kuja and Zidane with the intent of causing calamity on Gaia with another war greater than anything they had known.

At first, Zidane thought of Soulcage as an enemy. Without any proper words to explain Kuja why he hated the undead creature on first sight and wanted to tear it apart, Kuja shrugged it off as Soulcage's frightening appearance and that it was a close ally to Garland. Or perhaps Zidane thought Soulcage was too powerful to take on since the child screamed "Power, power, scary!" all the time. While Zidane did not remember Garland that well anymore, the old man's name triggered his aggressive instincts

and Soulcage was fast to remind him of the name. Zidane wanted to attack it, but Kuja advised him to stay calm with any allies of Garland.

Soulcage was merely an illusion to the whole Mist process of the Iifa Tree, which was why he adopted the shape of a cursed tree. Killing it will only slow down the great tree's true purpose.

After some while, when the child had calmed down, their long meeting with Soulcage bored Zidane. He was not interested into learning all this and that, but as an Angel of Death, this was something Garland has insisted that he was taught.

On their way home after the visit with Soulcage, from the air on Mahila's back, Zidane suddenly became excited. He pointed below while calling Kuja over and over, which had drawn the older brother's interest. Kuja realized that Zidane was pointing at a town far to the ground which he recognized as Madain Sari, the town of the Horned Humans, a place he used to visit often until Zidane's creation, more than five years ago.

How time flied.

Zidane insisted they went there, but Kuja advised that the Humans living there might not be tame and

kind like the Dwarves. They should be careful when meeting with them because they might not even like strangers. As he did years before, Kuja knew they will have to hide their tails and their lack of horn on their forehead when visiting the town.

Over the years, Kuja had learned to perfect his sewing and tailoring skills thanks to Zidane's constant growing body. With all the available resources in the Desert Palace, a week later, he confectioned two long cloaks with hoodies large enough to hide the most important part of their forehead and the robe part long enough to confine their furred appendage. Despite being told to be cautious with Humans, Zidane seemed enthusiastic with the idea of seeing and observing them in their "natural" habitat. The innocent boy might be expecting them to be friendly like the Dwarves. This was something to dread for as Kuja feared for Zidane to be too excited with meeting them, thus having the possibility to expose their cover.

But when they reached the town's borders, Zidane's excitement unexpectedly turned sour with fear in his eyes.

Keeping his distance, the boy shivered as soon as he spotted them playing on an open field close to

them. The fear went surprising far as he crawled himself to hide under Kuja's robe and hug him from beneath before curling his tail around his brother's leg. That ignited some confused look from the older Genome.

"Huh? What's happening?" Kuja asked him while raising his cloak and revealing the trembling child who was gripping firmly to him.

The fear of his voice clearly audible, Zidane hushed, "Humans… Power… Strong…"

"Strong? What do you mean by that?"

"Strong magic power… in Humans…"

Strong magic powers? What was this farce? Could it be that Zidane was able to sense the spiritual powers from the others in some way? Was this a feature given by Garland? Why had Kuja never been told about it or even gotten that power for himself? This could have been so useful… However, Zidane having in mind that power explained few things that had remained mysterious to Kuja for some time until now, mainly the reason why Zidane had initially feared their master and Soulcage.

Yet, if Zidane was truly blessed with such powers, despite lacking spiritual powers himself, he knew there was no need to sense jealousy over this. As long as Zidane was willing to cooperate with him, Kuja should see this feature as his own convenience. Thanks to this, he knew he was not ready to take on Garland now.

But if Zidane felt the immense power coming from these Humans, then what was the power he was speaking about? Were they adept at Black magic, White magic or even Blue magic? Kuja couldn't tell, but from the outset, the Humans did not appear any different from the Dwarves or others. Perhaps he will have to dig deeper into this investigation.

"It's okay," the young man reassured him, kindly pushing the kid away from his cloak and kneeling to his level. 'If you don't attack them, they will not attack you. Just listen to what I tell you, and you'll be okay. Just hide your tail and your forehead.' Kuja moved his hood over his head and smiled. "Just like this, alright?"

"Hmm hmm!" Zidane nodded and proceeded to imitate his big brother into hiding his unusual features.

Thus, for the first time, they ventured in the town together.

Kuja was already familiar with most of the Humans' culture, with them being similar from what he had read about the Terrans or seen in the Dwarves. The brothers were walking among the Humans as if they were one of them, nothing but passersby and ignored by all. However, Zidane found it arduous to ignore them when this town was bursting with life the deeper they strolled inside the town. It was so strange to discover creatures looking so much like himself or Kuja, with the only physical differences of that horn on their forehead and their lack of tail. That odd feature on their head was so special to the kid he almost wished he had one for himself as these seemed aesthetically appealing to him.

But even their endearing appearances would not get the Genome boy closer to them, for their grandiose spiritual powers scared him off.

Something else was stranger to the kid. He was dazed by so many different animals and oddly quiet monsters roaming among the Humans like each of them were part of their busy lives. When some Humans were communicating with animals in an

amicable way like Kuja and Zidane did with Mahila, others seemed to be raised as living prey, only to be killed later for their meat. The aspect of killing was familiar to Zidane, but keeping animals enclosed to get them killed later appeared cruel and unfair for his young mind to grasp. Everything about this town was a messy chaos of different things and lives happening at the same time. This was too overwhelming for the kid and he remained shut, never leaving Kuja's sides.

He didn't want to get attacked by these Humans after a false move, after all.

Yet, during their stroll, Zidane's curiosity won over his fear when they reached an area full of children around his age gathering together with an adult leading them. Taking notice how the children looked focused and attentive, yet burst with joy and laughs, Zidane became interested into joining them. He was going to walk to them until Kuja stopped him.

"***This is a teacher and his students,***" the young man taught his brother within their minds. "***They are taught great knowledge in schools.***"

Excited about the school concept, the kid responded, "***Fun fun! I go school too?***"

“***There are no schools for us, Genomes.***”

Zidane pouted and sighed.

Perhaps the boy lacked companionship…

…

The next day, after having gotten used to all that “power” radiating from the Humans, Zidane insisted they visited another part of the town where even more Humans of all ages gathered. The area was filled with so much lives with all sort of things and smells available to all, with food, caged animals, inanimate objects and miscellaneous devices, exposed on tables or on the ground. Behind the tables were Humans bragging out loud about ‘Sales’ and “best fresh food”.

This area was one of the zones Kuja had been too afraid to admit he had avoided, seeing too many people wandering on the same spot at the same time. He was afraid his cover would be busted because people might notice him and try to communicate with him. He still remembered an incident, the first and last time he visited that same area many years ago, when one of the Humans had tried offering him a freshly picked fish from the ocean. Ever since, he hadn’t ventured here except at night, where there

had barely been anyone walking outside save for creepier individuals and small stray animals.

However, all these exposed meats, vegetables and fruits triggered an inconvenient appetite in Zidane's stomach. Back in the desert, there weren't much variety of food available to them, food which mostly consisted of monsters' fleshes around the palace and the desert. With such a diversity of foods and delicious-looking juicy fruits, the kid's mouth drooled with an avid hunger. His eyes were set on one particular table with many different fruits and vegetables. When Zidane rushed out of Kuja's invisible, private bubble to reach the table, the man behind it gave the boy a glare which Zidane ignored.

"Kuja, I hungry," the young boy whined as he pointed at one big pear.

"No, Zidane. It is not the time to eat," the older brother protested, hushing him to settle down.

Yet, this was triggering more energy to burst out from the kid. He bounced once and said, "But I hungry. Many fruits here! Fruits good! I want!"

"No, don't take them," Kuja sighed at him before he turned away, expecting Zidane to do the same.

“We need to walk around more. We’ll get something to eat at home and then—”

“Hey, kid! That pear’s ten gil!”

That new hoarse, loud voice froze the young man on the spot. Kuja turned around again, only to face Zidane having sunk his teeth into the pear he had pointed at earlier with an arm caught by the man behind the table. The man was nowhere willing to release the child when the grip to the arm tightened and brought more pain. Zidane struggled to free himself while he left out a growl and this prompted panic to come over Kuja. The young man quickly caught the man’s arm, his worries washed over his face as he begged the man to release Zidane’s arm, which the man reluctantly did. Instead, the stranger’s glare was drawn toward the young man.

Taking a breath out of anxiety and trying to hush himself, Kuja spoke with the man, adopting his most reassuring tone. “I-I apologize,” Kuja began, looking at the man with pleading eyes. He took the pear from Zidane’s hand and put it back on the table. “I will get my brother and we will be going. Don’t m __”

However, Kuja’s sentence was cut with a grip to his own arm as the man appeared more furious than

ever. The clutch was so hard Kuja winced in pain, triggering a slight alarm in Zidane who Kuja tried to calm down. “This kiddo already bit into this pear!” the man snarled at him. “Can’t sell this anymore, ya know?! Where’s my ten gil?”

Having to deal with two aggressive people was already a difficult task. Trying to understand what the man meant was something else. Kuja struggled to give a proper response to him, but he couldn’t think of anything. “Ten… gil…?”

Taken by an intensifying rage, in a violent and abrupt move, the man dragged Kuja closer to him, accidently pulling the cloak out of him. “Ten gil, right! You scoundrels better hand it over, or else… else…”

Something had shut the man to stupor, something he had never imagined to see in his lifetime. Frozen by the shock, holding onto the young silver-haired man’s cloak in his hand, he could not take his sight off the two odd brothers.

That young man possessed no horn and he sported a moving furred tail matching his strange hair color.

“W-What are you?!” the man stuttered out loud, the hand still holding the tailed young man. What was this humanoid creature? He couldn’t have come from anywhere! Drawing attention from all around, he yelled, “Thieves, thieves! Yo—”

The yelling man was interrupted by a sudden deep bite to the arm, causing him to scream. Zidane was gnawing at him to free Kuja from his clutch. With both brothers freed and the man too busy trying to tame down the bloodied injury on his arm, Kuja and Zidane escaped the place, pushing all the Humans on their way as they were getting horrified glares and gasps from the others.

“***What… Thief? What I do bad?***” a rushing Zidane cried out in their minds, trying to run away from everything and leading the way with Kuja behind.

But Kuja seemed out of breath already. He wasn’t used to all this danger and dash in a civilized environment. Running, avoiding all the Humans and trying to find an answer to his brother at the same time were proven rather demanding. “***I… don’t know…***” the young man admitted, feeling his lungs out of breath.

They thought they could finally get some rest after reaching close to the town's border. Unfortunately, armored armed men soon appeared around them, circling the brothers with their weapon pointed at them. "Stop right here!" one of the men shouted as panic stirred in the Genomes. They must be the protectors of the town.

No, they couldn't just let themselves captured. They had the power to dispose of these Humans. All their trainings weren't for naught! Even if Garland had told them to not cause any useless uproar among Gaians…

… it was either the brothers or these Humans…

Before Kuja even collected his spiritual energy to start his magic attacks, Zidane stopped right before one of the men, taking his cloak out of convenience, causing another shock to the Humans who were startled by his appendage and lack of horn. After emitting a wild snarl and with his old feral instincts surging, Zidane latched onto a man's head like a parasite, clawing his eyes out and prompting everyone around to scream. Blinded by the injury and the excruciating pain, the man tried getting the tailed boy out of his face.

Instead, Zidane latched his tail around the man's neck and propelled him to the ground in a brutal landing, causing him to pass out. Satisfied by the move, the child picked the man's two daggers from his belt, intending on using them on the other men. With the weapons, he bounced to the side, avoiding the trajectory of a sword before he slashed through one's chest and throat, silencing him instantly.

Swift like the wind, Zidane jumped to another man who had no time to retaliate, piercing his throat with the two daggers and leaving him to the ground in a slow and painful death.

Meanwhile, Kuja focused on a group of men and casted some Firaga and Blizzaga spells from distance, incapacitating them all at once. This plan worked well at first until Kuja found himself out of breath. Yet, more armed men came to their kin's rescue, all trying to take on the powerful and agile Genome brothers. The young mage had never fought like this before, and he was now too fatigued to cast anything else.

However, Zidane remained as energetic as ever and he was ready to kill more of them with his newly acquired daggers.

“***No, Zidane! Stop this! We need to escape and get back to Mahila!***” Kuja shouted at him in their telepathic link, which Zidane thankfully detected and complied to. They both rushed to the only opening, where there were no men to block their path, leaving behind them a mess of blood, wounded and death, never looking back.

One of the armed men tried rushing after the brothers, with the man from the crowded place following closely behind, still holding onto his bloodied arm. Unfortunately, the two tailed creatures were now too far in the open of the outside fields. There was no way to reach the thieves and the man growled at himself in horror and fury. They had to do something about these two very dangerous strangers. “What the heck are they?!” the armed man exclaimed after having stopped to run to get his breath back.

“I-I don’t know, dammit!” the other man huffed out, now catching his breath too. “They… They’re not from this world for sure! They need to be taken care of, or they might kill more of us!”

Indeed, they were too far now, but the two men still could see the tailed brothers running off to the nearest patch of woods to find shelter.

“Alright…” the armed man exclaimed out, now straightening himself. They gave each other a long, determined glance before they nodded. “If we had to call out for them, then we’ll do this.”

The armed man shut his eyes and raised a hand to the sky. He whispered few words before his eyes shot wide open and he let out a war cry, with two words out…

“**MEGA FLARE!**”

Still on the loose on the field, Kuja and Zidane heard the shout behind but they paid no heed. All they were thinking of was to escape to the nearby wood where their dragon companion waited, not bothered to look back.

How strange. As they thought the Humans had stopped pursuing them and they were about to slow their steps down, the clear blue sky above began to fade into a dark and cloudy veil, with the wind blowing into a strong gust. They could not tell why there was a sudden storm starting, but they must not worry about this now. With Mahila now visible on the horizon and ready to join the brothers, they were about to fly away.

Their meeting was cut short when the earth began to shake under their feet, causing Zidane to trip on the ground with a shriek. With the on-going earthquake, Zidane fell backward as soon as he got himself on his feet. Desperate, he crawled on all four, thinking it might help to stabilize himself, but the ground shook stronger and louder, prompting the boy to scream his brother's name out of panic.

But Kuja barely heard the name. It was only when Mahila reached him that he realized Zidane was no longer by his sides. Dread spreading, he turned to see his little brother limping far from him on the ground, still calling him as he struggled to get on his feet. Ignoring their dragon companion as he could not think through rationally, Kuja rushed back to his brother.

The shaking ground turned into a blazing earthquake, causing both brothers to fall again. Before they could do anything, a large, deep crack on the ground elevated high, separating the brothers and spurring them into frenzy. Staggering on his feet, Kuja balanced himself backward and managed to stay upright without falling back. Quickly again, he looked to where Zidane was still fighting to stand and he was now too far from Kuja's reach.

What was that? What was happening?!

As the storm and the earthquake gained in intensity, a deafening roar resounded from the ground, defying the rest of the surrounding sounds like it claimed victory.

Then a dark, giant winged dragon emerged from the soil with the same blaring roar.

Rising high in the sky, the gigantic dragon turned itself around, trying to spot the target it had been commanded to fight. It found nothing worthy but when its eyes were set on the tiny tailed child struggling on the ground, the dragon’s eyes lit with excitement.

When Zidane was finally back on his feet, he saw the giant dragon above, its mouth converging powers and energy in one point which will soon be ready to be unleashed. At first, fear filled the child’s eyes, but knowing the dragon’s attack will be unavoidable, he did the only thing he could do right now.

Zidane caught the two daggers he had stolen and he readied himself to attack the gigantic monster.

“NO!” Kuja screamed in despair. In the same instant, he tried reaching for the dragon with his

most powerful Blizzaga spell, but his spell faded into nothingness like an invisible protective veil completely covered it from all kinds of attack.

No… What was this monster? How could such an invincible creature exist? It was going to kill Zidane!

With no other choice, the boy dashed forward screaming and he jumped toward the dragon, trying to reach it despite the high distance. His plan to attack was stopped when a bright, explosive blast was blown at full speed in a blaring sound force, completely hiding the child's agonizing screams. Zidane was thrown back to the ground in a violent launch, bruised and injured at each part of his body.

As the blasting beam vanished, the weak, dying child began to whimper as all his limbs were incapable of moving as if they built up too much weight. Working to keep his lids up, Zidane struggled to draw his sight back at the dragon but he could only spot a dark flying blur before him. He wanted to turn his head around as he desperately coveted to find his brother who had disappeared, and Kuja was still nowhere to be seen.

Satisfied that the child was no longer moving, the giant dragon readied another blast from its mouth, ready to give him the final blow that will propel him

into the cycle of souls for good as easily as Zidane had done with the Humans earlier.

His throat full of blood, Zidane coughed a weak last call. “K… Ku… Kuj… ja…”

His call was muted by another last blast from the dragon and the same bright light blinded him. Helpless, Zidane waited for his death in tears.

… Yet, the blast never hit him.

When he opened his eyes again, he could not make much of his blurred vision but he recognized the habitual soft fur below him and the strong breeze of being pulled to the air. This was a familiar and appeasing sensation of resting straight on his Silver Dragon friend’s back while she soared high above, the voice of his older sibling soothing him with gentle, caring words. He felt the caresses on his hair and he soon experienced the relieving effects of the Curaga spell on his entire body.

Kuja and Mahila had come to pick Zidane before the giant dragon could hit him again.

A nervous Kuja kneeled over Zidane, trying to get him moving again, but the older brother discovered Zidane’s pain remained and his wounds were not going to be completely healed with simple

magic. The injuries lied much deeper within his body and Curaga could only partly lift him from death.

With the brothers too far from reach, the giant dragon vanished in the air and the sky returned to its clear blue shade all of a sudden as if nothing had happened.

Was this dark, gigantic dragon a spirit from the underworld? Was it summoned to attack them?

And… what if it was that magic power Zidane feared from these Horned Humans…?

But the answers to these questions will wait. They were frivolous matters when there was something far more urgent to think about. “Zidane…?” Kuja’s soft, yet nervous voice called before he went to lower himself over his brother’s chest, searching for a heartbeat.

A heartbeat was felt inside but it was weak.

Raising his sight trying to get a look at his brother, Zidane was only able to see a fog before him. Yet, panic left him completely when he sensed the gentle brushes of Kuja’s slender fingers on his cheek. The pain had subdued thanks to Curaga, but each part of his insides was like torn muscles and

broken bones. It was painful and unbearable, and it caused few sobs and whines out of his bloodied mouth.

“Hurt… Kuja…” he stuttered into whispers before he shut his eyes full of tears.

Unable to bear the visible pain on his little brother, Kuja could not look at him again. To ease the pain, Kuja hushed to him, laying his finger over Zidane’s pained face before he murmured an incantation with a mixture of Cure and Sleep. As the worry and pain on Zidane’s face shifted to peace, Kuja sighed in relief. Finally, Zidane might be okay for now, but he was in dire need of advanced medical help.

Big brother’s instincts kicking in, Kuja wrapped a weak, innocent sleeping Zidane in his arms, cradling him like the young infant he used to be. His fear present but slowly leaving, he hugged him tight, his worries over losing the only one he truly loved still here and fresh in mind.

“Don’t worry, Zidane… Don’t worry… You will be fully recovered soon…”

***Author's note**: With that much power coming from the Invincible, I've always wondered why Garland didn't simply bother using it to destroy lives on Gaia instead of sending Angels of Death on the planet which takes 24 years to be effective. So, that's why I decided that the Invincible in this fic needs to build up power for long years before becoming a destructor of things again.*

"Mahila" means "Woman" in Indian, or something, according to Google. And weirdly enough, Kuja is apparently a girl's name in Indian too, lol.

And yeah, I know Kuja's design has everything sexually appealing on him, so maybe he does have a sexual drive sometimes. However, I always thought that since he was canonly created as an adult without complex emotions, well, he couldn't develop that drive during adolescence or something, just like other Genomes. Other fans will probably not agree with me, but I guess that's that for this PG13 story, haha.

Also, let's say this AU Zidane has an innate Scan ability, which is why he can determine spiritual power levels, or rather, MP from characters, lol.

Chapter 6: Revenge

"Short" chapter is short. And thanks again for the comment to the Guest and new favorite and all!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 6: Revenge

Thanks goodness, Zidane was going to be fine now, Kuja assured himself.

With the technology found in this Terran hideout in the desert, while ancient compared to what was found in Bran Bal and Pandemonium, Kuja was able to place Zidane in one of these healing tanks. Even as an older technology, it was much faster than anything that could be found scattered across the archaic planet of Gaia. Kuja noted the progresses of his brother's recovery, and with an estimate of another day, Zidane will be back anew as if nothing had happened. While Zidane remained unconscious inside the tank he bathed in, he should remember everything that had occurred earlier.

However, observing Zidane all weak and helpless inside the tank reminded him that, despite his subpar

agility and strength compared to normal Gaians, he was still only a child.

That incident in Madain Sari should be something to be recalled for as it gave them more understandings about Gaia's life. Thanks to it, while Zidane recovered, Kuja decided to make deeper researches on why that incident had happened.

He discovered that, despite having spied on the Dwarves and the Humans for years, he had never learned the concept of currency and larceny.

In fact, from what he remembered of the ancient Terran civilization, as Garland had put it, the notion of currency or money was inexistent. The Terrans used to live in a flawless utopia where there was no money involved at all for services and goods exchanges. Instead, each citizen had a certain role and talent to fill in a society, wherein these roles and talents were used to help each other in perfect harmony. Kuja read more into a book that money used to exist but the Terrans ditched the concept to avoid corruption among the civilization, which led to ultimate peace for them until their demise thanks to Terra's dying crystal.

And then came the concept of larceny. The fact was already familiar to him. In fact, when he

observed monsters and various animals living in the wildlife of Gaia, stealing preys and foods from others was an essential facet for survival. This was a natural aspect for creatures, whether they were part of the “thieves” or the “victims”, and all the wild beasts accepted it. It was a cruel life where the strong survived and the weak perished.

But that wildlife concept was no longer an acceptable element to the sentient beings like the Dwarves and the Humans, wherein they formed several societies and a civilization where, long ago, they had accepted to live in peace together. To keep up with this harmony, they had to abandon parts of their freedom, mainly by not stealing goods from the others and by not committing into killing their kinds unless necessary, like protecting their loved ones from a corrupted fellow.

But killing without a good reason, at least according to these sentient creatures, had its proper term.

Murder.

The concept of murder was intriguing. Kuja and Zidane had killed creatures before, but that was all it was to them, to kill things. In nature, herbivore and omnivore beasts feasted on plant matters, thus

wounding and killing these inanimate living creatures in the process. Omnivore and carnivore creatures hunted and devoured all other types of living things capable of self-movement, whether they were preys or predators, thus killing to sustain themselves. All these killings were part of the natural aspect of Gaia's wildlife.

But these killings weren't murders because they were necessary.

Thus, this was where Kuja realized they had been committed to several greater crimes, all at once.

Shifting the term of killing these Humans in Madain Sari to murder was an interesting idea. Without the money needed for a fair exchange for the bitten pear to that man in the town, Zidane had committed larceny. However, by killing some of the Humans who were responsible to protect their town, they committed the worse crime of murder. From what Kuja gathered, because they perpetrated a smaller crime and because their victims were protecting the town from the Genome brothers, they both had no right to kill them, and thus, they committed murders.

Even back with the ancient Terrans, murder was one of the worst crimes one could execute, along

with torture and lastly, rape, which was carrying out into sexual acts to another non-consenting partner, a notion that did not exist in the wildlife either.

Murder… When Kuja had murdered these Humans, he had found himself oddly satisfied like he experienced superiority over them. For his thirteen years of existence, having been Garland's servant had taken a toll on his core, wherein his inferiority complexes would always lead his ways. Right now, he still was his master's servant, being constantly monitored and contacted by him. However, whenever he realized he had the upper ground over these mere Gaians, the thrilling rush passing through with each kill offered him a delightful bliss. Killing creatures and even Humans proved his superiority over them, and for once, he was the one to lead.

Was this the same thrilling feeling Zidane sensed when he unleashed his feral tendencies on other creatures? Will Kuja get the same gratifying impression by initiating a war on this planet?

Perhaps.

Within few days, Kuja had learned more of Gaia than he did in few years. Being taught things and witnessing events really differed from experiencing

these moments themselves. With that much acquired knowledge, the next encounters with Humans should go smoother. After all, to meet his goals, he had no choice but to interact with them again and more often.

Kuja learned another interesting fact about these Humans living in Madain Sari. Truly, he should stop calling them “Humans”, but “Summoners” instead. In fact, true Humans lacked a horn on their forehead.

As there were only Terran books in this palace which he could refer to, Kuja read that Terran Summoners used to exist on the old Terra. Even they possessed a horn that looked like the ones the Gaian Summoners carried. Summoners on both planets possessed the power to summon the Eidolons, the great legendary spirits of their home planet, to defeat their most powerful enemies. With that strange feature Garland had given him, Zidane had been able to tell that these special “Humans” possessed a grandiose spiritual energy. The Summoners, trying to dispose of the brothers, had summoned a great dragon. If the rest of their clan was capable of such feat, then they will be an enormous obstacle against Kuja’s goal to rule over the world.

With the Summoners blocking his path to victory and freedom, he will never be able to prove that Garland had been wrong about calling Kuja a failure and he will remain his servant, forever.

If only Kuja could possibly murder all the Summoners…

Was there a way to get rid of these Summoners, all of them? Even if he could start a war among them, there will still be individuals around powerful enough to dispose of the source of that hypothetical war, mainly the Genome brothers, as easily as they were so close to dispose of them earlier. That posed a great problem.

The Eidolons they summoned were great immortal beings, at least as long as their planet's crystal thrived with the cycle of souls. Without the Summoners to call them, these spirits will come to naught.

Such powers… Was there a way to gain that power? Theoretically, if there were no Summoners left on Gaia, will the Eidolons live on? Surely, they couldn't just rot as wandering legends for eternity, right? They will have to find new masters.

What if he could? If only he could rule using the power of these legendary Eidolons… Oh! How he coveted to see Garland's fear! His master would despise him so much Kuja will only find satisfaction over this! That old android man will retract his affirmation of calling him a failure!

Speaking of the devil, if Garland had once met these ancient Terrans (after all, Garland had been created by them five thousand years ago), he certainly knew the extent of the Terran Summoners' powers. Without that knowledge from the old man, Kuja faced with no choice but to request his master's advice to defeat this huge obstacle to his goals. Using their connected minds, the young Genome asked his master what he should do.

Use the Invincible, Garland told him.

Right. These words were a puzzle to his ears, but as he quoted from one of his favorite Terran books, "every puzzle has an answer". But Garland's reminder made him realized that he had nearly forgotten that both him and his brother were given the ability to command the Invincible from distance with their telepathic minds. However, an Eidolon like that giant dragon could easily destroy their airship, if it ever came to that. From what he had

witnessed, an Eidolon, being a spirit, appeared to be fully protected from any mortals' attacks, whether they were of physical or magical nature. Then, what exactly could defeat them? Another Eidolon?

Kuja understood he will have to think through and develop his knowledge along so that one day, he will be able to start a war and get rid of these Summoners.

Months later, Kuja nearly gave up on finding a way to use the Invincible to destroy the Summoners.

Instead, his researches were drawn to another plan which he discovered while skimming into the grand library of their palace. Using the candles to rise himself on the top floor, he came to pick one of the books that had caught his attention recently, one teaching a forbidden magic the most powerful ancient Terran mages had used.

Ultima.

The name derived from the "ultimate magic attack" which could destroy anything in one go, something that only three Terran mages had achieved as far as this book had seen its first day of

existence. Coincidently, it had been written by one of the three mages who had used the spell in a war against Summoners and their Eidolons, which had led her and her people to victory. Supposedly, Ultima was the only magic spell from mortals that could hurt the Eidolons.

Now, this was exactly what Kuja needed.

However, learning how to cast Ultima was not for the faint and the weak. One needed to be a very strong mage with a grandiose spiritual potential after having sharpened long years of experiences in magic and everything. Fourteen years of practice was barely anything, according to the book, and this was why Kuja swore to learn the spell as a backup plan. He might not be able to cast this magic now, but if his next years spent to forge his plans to overthrow Garland and rule the world ever went astray, then perhaps being able to use Ultima will save his face from failure.

Lately, he'd been so busy reading this book he had virtually forgotten about his brother crying for attention. Having now reached his sixth year, Zidane had alleviated himself from being the brat he used to be, but he was speaking more new words that

sometimes irritated Kuja when he needed his time alone.

Curious on the book his brother read with a religious concern, Zidane tiptoed before Kuja, trying to get a peek at the book. “What you read?” the child asked. Even at six, Zidane still could not get rid of his habit of speaking broken sentences.

With a tired sigh, Kuja rolled his eyes before he offered him a grunt. “‘The Ultimate Magic, Ultima’,” Kuja replied, intending to shoo Zidane away. “Now, leave me alone. I need all the focus to read it.”

“Why?” Zidane added. He appeared nowhere ready to leave despite his brother’s obvious hassle. For months, this single word “why” had become the young boy’s favorite reply, and Kuja hated it.

Putting the book away, Kuja gave Zidane his most upset, yet tranquil glare, which had not deterred Zidane away. “Do you really want to know?” Kuja twisted his words like he was mocking the boy, but the child didn’t care.

“Yes!” was his immediate response.

Exhausted by the boy’s curiosity, Kuja sighed again. “Fine, if you must know…” the young man

breathed in before releasing his words. “Ultima is the ultimate magic spell that, if I am capable of casting it, will allow us to dispose of the Summoners for good and will free us from Garland. This spell of legend can destroy entire towns and even worlds. If I am able to use it, we will need no war and we will rule the worlds. I am unable to use it for now as I am going to need further trainings and experiences before I am even given the chance to cast it.”

From Zidane’s silence and his eyes blinking innocence, it was clear the child had not been following anything Kuja had just said. Of course, with his very short attention, Zidane found it too difficult to follow more than four or five consecutive words in one sentence. However, just like a child of six should, he responded with a nod like he wanted to show his big brother that he was a big boy, one who understood big words and longer sentences.

“Okay!” Zidane exclaimed, the grin forming on his face clearly showing that he did not grasp a thing. “I learn Ultima too?”

Unexpectedly, Kuja could not suppress a burst of laugh coming out of him, which had even scared Zidane. “Dear, dear little brother,” Kuja began, putting an odd emphasis on the word ‘little’ as he

teased the boy who was oblivious to the mocking tone he was using. “You do realize that an insane magic potential is needed to cast this magic attack. If you cannot cast a modest Fire spell, then you should simply forget about Ultima.”

Truth be told, Kuja recalled that Garland had told him once about Zidane’s potential for magic, which actually existed within the boy but, hypothetically speaking, it will never reach Kuja’s level. Kuja had attempted to teach the child’s some magic, but Zidane had the patience of a fish and he would give up fast on trying to cast magic after failing few times.

Still, a spiritual power potential was hidden deep within him. Perhaps one day, the boy will develop himself and will be capable of using spells. For now, he was a simple brat who was discovering his appeal with the art of using knives and daggers since he had used them against the Summoners’ encounter. After all, these weapons were small and light in weight, which were convenient assets for a child so small. They were easier to use and they certainly left a much less chaotic mess behind than with the use of fangs and claws when he killed something.

“I want Ultima!” Zidane cried with his biggest grin, not the least concerned by Kuja’s criticism. He even went to poke the book his brother held. “I want book, too?”

Shutting the book in a sudden clasp, Kuja sighed at Zidane again. “I thought you hated to read books,” the older brother commented, not even trying to look back at the boy. “This book is clearly not aimed at children like you.”

“I want book too!” the boy insisted and he continued to poke at it.

Growling at him in infuriation, Kuja stood back in silence and went to pick another book in the bookshelf before he returned to Zidane. Eyes widening in surprise, the boy stared at the book and discovered it was a copy of the same book Kuja had been reading.

After thanking Kuja, the boy picked the book and rushed to their bedroom, where he excitedly skimmed into each page like he was trying to find specific features inside. The disappointment came quick when he realized there was nothing in the pages but letters and some boring pictures. He pouted, feeling betrayed by his older brother who

had never told him about the lack of drawings inside this Ultima book.

Bored out of his mind, Zidane kept the book inside his drawers and went to pick up a pen and ink to begin drawing on blank papers.

Kuja came back to their room later that day, only to find Zidane sleeping on the table with multiple drawings across. The young man was about to pick up the child and put him on his bed until a particular drawing caught his curious eyes. While Zidane was a particularly decent artist for his age, this one appeared too surreal for Kuja's taste.

On the drawing, Kuja and Zidane were casting Ultima on mushroom-like structures.

Kuja couldn't help but smile.

Whenever they returned to Madain Sari for observation, Zidane did everything to stay by Kuja's sides, afraid to commit the same mistake as making one of the Summoners angry. With new cloaks to pass as Summoners among them, no one suspected them to be the tailed intruders that killed their kinds before. However, the brothers never interacted with

the Summoners by fear one or two might recognize them. Yet, despite all, thanks to his talent for stealth, Zidane managed to execute more than few smaller crimes of thievery where he stole fruits and even more daggers to add to his arsenal. Over time, using daggers and knives remained his preferred method of killing.

But even after months, they still could not think how they will get rid of the Summoners efficiently without risking to shed their own blood or get the Invincible destroyed by the powerful legends. If more Eidolons were to be summoned against them, they might not get as lucky as last time.

Today had been the same without any visible change or new findings. After their day spying on the Summoners, they returned to the nearest wood where they discovered their Silver Dragon injured. They did not know what happened to her, but she could not fly well. Kuja rushed to heal her with a Curaga spell which relieved her of the injuries but not the internal pain. The young man judged it was not wise to ride her home in her state.

Unfortunately, they had to set a camp for the night until Mahila got better. She needed rest, and so did the brothers. Using one of their old Moogle

tents, the Genomes lied on the hard ground where Kuja scarcely found slumber. Unable to sleep as well, Zidane insisted that Mahila needed his protection while she rested out of the tent. He dashed outside to the dragon instead where he leaned his back against her body and found torpor before he could even attempt to protect her. Pleased to see the boy by her side, the dragon covered him with the feathers of her wing, keeping him warm in this cold world.

Kuja was almost tempted to admit the scene to be adorable. Zidane was such a fearless child that he had no care to expose himself to the dangers of the wildlife to protect his loved ones. The young man will have to be vigilant about his brother's careless moves as anything might kill him.

But today, Kuja refused to sleep outside. It was something he did not miss from his old times on Gaia alone before he got to meet Zidane. No, Kuja was going to slumber in the tent alone, and not even the hard ground will shake off that final decision.

Yet, he hadn't spent an hour in his sleep that something roused him away from his dreams. Flicking his lids to make out his surrounding, as he let the consciousness overtake him, he caught

himself in shock to see a freaked Zidane shaking him and calling his name repetitively. From the opening of the tent, Kuja saw a bright red and orange light flickering with a continuous, blazing deep sound with lighter noises of crackles and wind flutters.

Then he smelled the pungent odor of smoke and he felt the hot burning air.

“Fire! Fire!” Zidane yelled as he continued to shake Kuja.

When they both rushed out of the tent, they were faced with a gigantic forest ablaze with killing flames spreading faster than they could run. If they remained here on foot, the Genome brothers will not even be able to outrun this fatal catastrophe, even with water magic. As much as panic was set on their dragon, Mahila waited for her two Genome companions to ride her, which they promptly did to save their skins. Thankfully, she appeared recovered enough to be allowed to fly again.

As Mahila soared to the night sky, the brothers witnessed the spreading destruction of the forest by the catastrophic wildfire from above. That deadly natural disaster would have killed them if it wasn’t for Zidane’s fast response to the fire. They spotted a

flock of birds and miscellaneous flying creatures escaping the raging flames by the aerial path, but the smoke and the spreading burning air suffocated some of them, bringing them back to the ground where they met their demise. More ground animals and monsters tried outrunning the racing fire, but the slower ones were engulfed by the flames in their painful death. If the fire wasn't going to kill most of them, the suffocating scent of sizzling fleshes and woods choked the rest to their slow end.

This wildfire brought death that even the most powerful monsters could not overcome. This was a natural tragedy at its finest.

… Finally.

How that fire had been started was not important. It could have been anything, whether someone in the forest had played with fire, whether a magic monster had casted a Fire spell at the wrong place and time. No, what mattered right now was that Kuja had uncovered a solution to the Summoners' issue. If the brothers could not fight them without risking their own lives, there was at least one way to murder them all at once.

"***Master Garland, we need you to give the Invincible a small modification for us,***" Kuja

requested the old man with their connected minds. With this, a smile crawled to his lips.

…

And what a marvelous performance they got to watch, a month later.

All safe in the sky from the disaster below, Kuja and Zidane got the best seats on their dragon friend's back, watching the spectacle of a whole town ablaze. They listened to the choir of suffering screams like an orchestra of despair and a symphony of death. With the vengeful eye of the Invincible watching over the destructive storm that was transforming Madain Sari into a forgetful ruin in blazes, Kuja admired the fruits of his efforts. That murderous storm and spreading flames that were killing the town were all the products of their Terran airship Kuja was controlling, making it appear like a natural disaster. He made it look like a given punishment by the planet set to the Summoners for having dared to hurt his young and innocent brother.

Unable to take his eyes away from the mighty flames, Zidane grinned wider as he spotted the same dragon Eidolon that had tried to kill him aimlessly wandering in the sky above the town, helpless. What could the dragon do to save its masters anyway?

Bring more destruction to it? More Eidolons wandered around the town, struggling to find a way to save it, but even that Eidolon looking like a blue giant woman could not stop the fire from spreading with her ice powers. Not even Eidolons could go against a “natural” calamity of mass destruction.

When Kuja noticed the few folks escaping their town on tiny boats below them, he giggled at their demise as the raging ocean devoured each of them one by one with gigantic waves. It was like watching a colony of ants exposed to the air to avoid the flood of a violent rain, only to find themselves drowned into an unconquerable torrent.

Kuja might have used a tremendous amount of the Invincible’s energy to cause this natural disaster to wipe Gaia out of the Summoners’ existence. Because of this, he will not be able to use the same power for many long years, perhaps in another decade, according to Garland.

But this spectacle of death was worth all the money on Gaia. They truly were Angels of Death.

Murder was a fun concept, but strangely enough, revenge was an even more satisfying idea.

***Author's note**: I first thought if I should include Sarah/Garnet in a way or another in Madain Sari, but this had been done often in other fanfictions. Sorry, no Zidane meeting a kiddy Sarah/Garnet!*

In the game, Garland apparently feared the Summoners for some while, so he ordered Kuja to destroy them with the Invincible. I thought this was kind of illogical seeing Garland could have destroyed them with the Invincible long ago, if he was aware of their existence. Hence, why in this fic, he didn't know their powers until that incident with the siblings.

The "Every puzzle has an answer" quote is inspired by one of my favorite gaming series, Professor Layton.

Chapter 7: Influence

Things should get more interesting now, I hope.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 7: Influence

Just for the fun of it, Kuja redirected the Invincible above Conde Petie. The fearful eye under the airship glared straight to the Dwarves who were set into panic upon seeing it in the sky. The Genome commanded it to prompt the same storm that had decimated the Summoners, but nothing came out of it. The giant red eye induced more fear than harm among the Dwarves. Kuja wished Garland had been wrong about the Invincible taking years and even decades to recover its destructive power, but unfortunately, the old man was right.

How could such a technological wonder take so much time to recover?

Well, a war, then.

They had been observing every nook and cranny on this bare continent. With the opportunity of a

Zidane growing up to his seventh year now and speaking and holding up to longer conversations, Kuja judged it was time to visit the other continents of Gaia. Trusting the old hologram map given by Garland and deducing the trajectory of the migratory birds, his best bet was to head South to the other side of the vast ocean to find new civilizations. According to Soulcage, this was where most of the roots of the Iifa Tree headed to spread the byproduct of the soul flow called the Mist. If the birds made their way to that continent, then surely, that area should be bursting with life. This meant more chance to meet these true Humans who led on the planet.

With both being more familiar with the basis of Gaian culture, Kuja was now confident enough with his social skills to get closer to its planet's sentient inhabitants. This was the only way to gain trust from them.

Things should get more interesting, hypothetically, with more Gaians around them.

Unfortunately, Kuja was not sure if their dragon companion could cross the ocean without resting. Thankfully, she had been trained for long flights and soaring above the ocean should be a breeze with few

stops. Nevertheless, Kuja would rather be prepared with various supplies to sustain themselves as he had no idea what awaited them on the new continent and how long their trip will last. His supply consisted of dried meat and fruits, few potions and ethers. Of course, Zidane could not leave without these two new shiny daggers he had just discovered in the Desert Palace. These weapons should be convenient since Zidane had become a dagger prodigy fast.

Surprisingly, their trip only ended on their second day after resting on one of the tiny islands of an archipelago for one night. That day, as soon as they saw a wide land and a mountain chain, they knew their destination was near. For the first time, they were able to get a glimpse of the spreading Mist in a mass quantity to the point it appeared like a thick poisonous fog. However, thanks to their Genome nature, neither Kuja nor Zidane were affected by the corrupting and hardening effects the Mist had on the Gaians' minds over time. From the ground, they noticed the Iifa Tree roots scattered around at random spots, though without proper knowledge, it was quite difficult to distinguish the Terran tree's roots from a regular giant tree. Certainly, no Gaians

suspected these roots to be the cause of the Mist or to take their origin from another far-away continent.

Unfortunately, with the Mist floating around, the ground level of this continent was bare of sentient lives. Only few monsters and animals could survive without going insane from too much Mist absorption. This was not so different from the wildlife they found on the Outer Continent. The ground level of this new continent was of no interest.

However, on the higher grounds of the continent where the Mist was too scarce to represent a threat to the Gaians, life was spread with so much greenery and living things. This looked nothing like the rare forest's spots on the Outer Continent. The woods were filled with a rich wildlife and infinite amount of edible vegetation, the plains where bursting with vivid vegetation and smaller animals, and more interestingly, towns and cities were established everywhere. When Zidane seemed more interested into finding new fresh preys and sweet fruits to devour in the wilderness, Kuja sought to meet these true Humans Garland had spoken of back on Terra.

But meeting with them exposed the brothers to danger. Kuja dreaded that another incident like the

one with the Summoners could happen with Zidane again, if the boy was not careful enough. As they were both oblivious to many Gaian customs, Zidane might still be, in some way, an innocent brat who could act like an annoying devil to the Humans at anytime. He could commit into more crimes that were unknown to the Genomes but obvious to a Gaian.

Before they settled for a new place to call home on this continent, the brothers spent the next month visiting each village, town and city. They were making sure there was no dislike of foreigners among their citizens by the fear their tails might strike more fear into the minds of the people as with the Summoners of Madain Sari. However, they realized their extended appendage might not bring that much attention from the Gaians when there were so many diverse sentient creatures roaming in this new world. Aside from Humans, those ones looking like Genomes without a tail that made up most of the inhabitants, there were other creatures walking and communicating among them. These anthropomorphic personages with humanoid bodies bore physical features of animals, mainly their heads, limbs and skins. They were just as any walking animals that were parts of the civilization

and that were equal to Humans. As they were part of humanity as well, Kuja decided to call them Anthropomorphs, a term which was shared between him and Zidane.

Still, Humans dominated this planet, and with such a rich diversity on the continent, two “Humans with a tail” might not be looking so abnormal after all, even when most of these anthropomorphic creatures sported no tails.

They began their trip to the beautiful country of Alexandria and its capital of the same name, where a rustic, yet gigantic and majestic castle with a giant sealed sword stood erect over a big town filled with excited lives. Around the town, the rich landscape provided them infinite number of crops and food. In the same kingdom, bathed in the eternal night, the city of Treno hosted entertainment and excitement to both noble and poor ones of this land.

Then they stopped to the country of the most powerful nation on the continent they now knew as the Mist Continent. This was where stood the gigantic city of Lindblum, where a peaceful regent ruled, despite its biggest military and its most technological advancements. According to Garland, this was where the technology of airships fueled by

the Mist took birth, which caused the peace to rise among people and wars to stop.

Then lastly, they visited the kingdom of Burmecia, the only land on the continent that was not led by Humans, but rather anthropomorphic rat-like people sworn by honor who held peaceful relations with the Humans and all others. Poured under eternal rain on the ground level of the Mist Continent, this was the only part of the lower lands where there was no Mist thanks to the constant rain. In this country also stood another gigantic tree surrounded by an unconquerable sand tornado sustained by magic from within.

Now that they had visited all these places, how to start a war? Kuja could not simply request the people to fight each other and then be good with it. He had to find a way that will involve all these three grand nations without the need to stain his own hands with the blood of so many.

Having a younger brother of seven who was now speaking more fluently than ever, here came the never-ending questions from a bratty child.

“What’s a war?” Zidane asked his brother who sighed at him. As they were stuck together sitting on Mahila’s back in the sky, Kuja knew he could not

escape the questions this time. At this point, he better just played along.

“According to Garland, a war is when two nations or more fight each other because of conflicting beliefs and ideals, involving the people from each nation in a way or another.” Kuja tried keeping his explanation as simple as possible.

“What’s an ideal?”

“Hmm, it’s like a life goal.”

“Oh,” the boy added, lost and uninterested by the answer. “Why you want war?”

Despite his constant progresses with his speech, Zidane still spoke broken sentences at times.

“Because…” Kuja stopped for an instant, realizing that Zidane will not understand whether he kept his explanation simple or not. The boy’s attention span and even his short-term memory for these kinds of long informational sentences were shorter than the hairs of his tail. “That’s it! We are just following Garland’s orders!”

“So, we can murder?”

It’d been always intriguing, and even funny, to see this innocent-looking child who had taken the

habit of using the word “murder” rather than ‘kill’. To Zidane, “murder” was as casual as “tree” or “animal”. He must truly share that same curious passion as his older brother to watch things die. It must be an instinct that Garland had anchored in them as Angels of Death.

“No, we won’t kill,” Kuja said. “We will prompt the war, but we won’t kill. The others will.”

“Oh.”

That “Oh” sounded rather disappointed. Whenever Zidane said that word, Kuja knew the boy was not certain to understand anything. However, Kuja was pretty sure Zidane grasped at the “no kill” part. In these times of peace and observation, there had not been much actions going on in their lives. A monster kill or two might bring him back to a better mood.

“How we start war?” Zidane inquired.

“I… still do not know…” Kuja admitted, taking an embarrassed gulp.

“Why we not use Invincible again to murder?” The child’s face lit up at the idea he thought to be the brightest ever. How funny the boy was not aware that he could control the Invincible as well, but Kuja

would rather not tell him how. Despite his memory worthy of a flea, Zidane remembered well each details of Madain Sari's destruction with the Invincible.

No wonder, its destruction was a sight of marvel.

"We cannot," the young man told. "Remember what Master Garland said. It will take years to be recharged and restored."

"Why?"

That was it! Zidane was doing this on purpose, he knew it! It had to be! His patience having left him, Kuja took a huge breath and put up his most infuriated expression. "Stop it! Spare me of your dumb questions!" Kuja yelled, and expectedly, a bratty, satisfied grin crawled up to Zidane's happy face. Watching his big brother lose his temper over silly things amused him, as if Kuja's impatience triggered his satisfaction. Perhaps this was Zidane's rebellious phase or he saw this as a game which he always won.

As the researches had taught Kuja, one of the better bases on how to start a war was to amplify the corruption in the minds of the world's leaders. Corruption had triggered several wars in the ancient

Terra, and Kuja was certain this basis will work on Gaia as well. As all the grand nations were enjoying a lasting peace, he had to find a catalyst, a weak point in their souls.

But how exactly will he approach a leader? Unlike most of the citizens, the leaders were out of reach from the commoners, and from a cultural point of view, both Kuja and Zidane were deemed as lowest commoners. Leaders were guarded and protected by countless of underlings, making them near impossible to meet from their stance, at least in good terms.

His guts were telling him that the best place to start studying for a possibility to meet a leader was to make home to an area full of nobles, these wealthy, important people of higher ranks among the society. Treno, that city radiating under the eternal night, should be his best bet. Unfortunately, having to remain in the city for long had to force them to hide their dragon Mahila from the Gaians with the fear of causing a commotion among the citizens. However, since they had no place to call home yet in the town, both brothers would come back to the woods where their dragon hid for the nights to set up their fortune camp. And when they'll find a home in Treno, Zidane reassured her he'll come to visit her

every day. Kuja had never been sure if the Silver Dragon actually understood their speeches and language, but Zidane seemed to understand her feelings.

From her instincts, perhaps she understood Zidane's feelings too.

After a day walking around Treno, the first thing they made note was that no one truly paid attention to the brothers' presence in town as they were only part of the crowd. Unlike the Summoners who did not seem to appreciate foreigners, the Gaians here were more akin to the Dwarves who did not mind having outsiders roaming around with so many diverse sentient creatures walking among everyone. However, unlike the Dwarves who loved meeting new people, the Gaians here, Humans and Anthropomorphs alike, did not care of newcomers and they ignored the Genomes.

That was until they noticed their tails.

Even with such diversity among Gaians, there was something that all Humans and the Anthropomorphs lacked, and that was a tail. With the only exception of Burmecians who lived together as another nation, no other sentient races part of the humanity on Gaia actually sported a tail.

Having the presence of two Humans with a furred tail had spurred few curious eyes on them. Sometimes when the brothers were looked at for their appendages, they might received negative feedbacks from the most talkative ones, whether the commenters were nobles or poor people living in the slums.

Seeing no one willing to cooperate with them, Zidane took the bad habit of responding to all with a hateful growl which usually scared away the others. Kuja had to teach him to calm down each time. Still, as most people chose to ignore them despite their tails, they were able to observe the ways of the nobles and the others without having to hide or cause a ruckus, which was a convenience for them.

And it was during these observations on nobles that Kuja learned what type of attires they liked to wear, and thus, he came with the idea to wear noble outfits. For years, the brothers had been wearing these cloaks on the Outer Continent or these simple garbs from Terra. Kuja’s tailoring skills should come in a good use, but creating entire new outfits without the proper materials was beyond his reach right now. Because of their lack of sewing and tailoring equipment, Zidane’s thievery skills came in handy when he was able to steal two complete outfits for

them. Unfortunately, these clothes bore no holes where they could fit their tails, so Kuja had to tear a hole into their pants. He then used a sewing kit that Zidane had stolen to make sure these holes won't be torn apart from the continuous movement of their appendage.

Finally, after few days, each wore a proper attire that might draw the nobles' attention on them on a more positive means.

However, that did not completely go as expected. Now, they looked like normal nobles that no one knew, so to the other nobles, they were wealthy strangers of no importance. Even when they'd noticed the tails, they would turn away without a word.

If using noble attires did not work, then perhaps they needed wealth. How will they earn money fast, then?

Taking advantage of his little brother's ability of thievery again, Kuja requested Zidane to steal money from the nobles. This was an easy task for him, but knowing nothing of the value of each monetary pieces, they discovered that each steal wasn't worth that much. For a day, however, they got enough to spend some times in a café where they

might hear more gossips from the wealthy ones of Alexandria.

That time spent in the café had been more or less fruitful. Two noblewomen began to squeal with delight at the discovery of this strange, unknown noble child with a tail, saying how adorable he looked. This was the first time Gaians ever found an appeal on their furred appendage and Zidane did not seem to like the attention he was getting. When the women noticed the older brother, they were swooned over his endearing, delicate appearance despite his tail on his rear. Unlike the child, Kuja was rather pleased with that attention and praise.

So, not all Gaians were truly alike as they would either hate, love or ignore them. This meant they will have to find specific targets to influence… And this was no easy task, especially when they knew no one here.

Zidane was getting more annoyed by the two women until they decided to buy cakes and sweets for the brothers. Now, food was something Zidane liked, and as soon as they offered him the food, the child gladly devoured them, much to Kuja’s shock.

Only at the eating part that the noblewomen began to manifest disgust and grimaces over the

brothers. Watching Zidane eating the cakes like a mindless savage animal turned them away and they even felt offended. No noble should be eating like this, they told the brothers as they walked away with a snobby humph.

This was how Kuja discovered that their path to become part of the nobles will be harder than he had planned. Not only he will have to wear their attires and gain wealth, but he will have to act like them. While Kuja had always been more culturally refined than Zidane in everything, he was not certain how strict the nobles were with acting, speaking and even eating manners. Of course, Zidane's way of eating might have gone a little too far from a noble's point of view, but Kuja will have to do all he could to teach him how to eat slower and more delicately.

Zidane hated how he had to adapt himself to these wealthy Gaians.

Days followed, and all these times spent listening to others in the Treno cafés brought him few advantageous facts that might be useful to his goals.

To put it simple, should they get closer to a world's leader, they must become known influential figures. To be influential to the world, they will need wealth, great ideas that will please the leaders and be

noticed by them. Currently, they possessed none of them, but Kuja will find a way. All these things together will not guarantee to meet a leader, but they will surely push the chance to.

But gaining money and rising his wealth won't be easy. Stealing money from the nobles was certainly not enough. People earned money by providing services in exchange for money, but even working hard will not be enough to rise among the nobles. They had to find something else more profitable.

Kuja and Zidane walked around, visiting all sorts of areas, and they discovered few work fields being more lucrative than others. But there was one part in town where they stumbled upon so many Gaians of all sort, most having attires that showed much of their skin bare. Kuja was not sure why, and Zidane decided to call these people wandering in this area dumb because the permanent night hovering over Treno caused the weather to be colder here. However, something about the people's attires in these parts of the town attracted Kuja's curiosity. Exhibiting their bodies as such seemed to appeal him as if he'd find himself endearing if he was to wear these kinds of clothes.

And when a passing older nobleman approached them and proposed to give Kuja a huge amount of money if he will spend the night at his home with him, Kuja seemed intrigued by the offer, especially with that much money involved. However, Kuja refused to leave Zidane alone outside and he requested that his younger brother accompanied him too. The man was surprised by the suggestion, but he was fine with the request. He responded something about getting “two beautiful tailed hookers for the price of one”, which neither Kuja nor Zidane understood.

Everything went well when the brothers accompanied the man and his guards to his house. The home turned out to be more than a modest manor, nearly at the level of the Desert Palace, except much smaller and with pieces of arts and large rooms scattered everywhere. Instead of being allowed to observe the arts and everything else, the nobleman led them quick to what appeared to be a personal bedroom.

And this was when it went downhill, when the man shut the door behind him, enclosing both Kuja and Zidane with him in the room. The noble invited them to sit on his gigantic bed, which they did. Soon, the man began to caress Kuja’s slender

cheeks, smiled at them and gently asked them to strip naked.

Not understanding the situation at all, Zidane began to take away his clothes by starting with his pants. Now Kuja finally grasped what truly was happening. He had seen this in Madain Sari before, though he had never paid any heed to it as it didn't concern him nor his goals for world domination. He knew exactly what the man intended to do with them.

"***Put back your clothes,***" Kuja ordered Zidane in their telepathic link. Astounded by the order, Zidane complied, and suddenly, rage waved over the nobleman.

They were going to leave without a word until the man called a guard, ordering the tailed brothers to stay and comply with his commands if they wished to earn the money. Kuja let him know that he was no longer interested with the money, but this did not discourage the man from stopping. The man gone mad, he threatened Kuja to keep Zidane as a slave after killing Kuja. Both brothers oddly calm, they did not retort until a guard caught Zidane by his collar.

Before the child did anything against the guard, the silver-haired young man raised a hand, whispering something the noble and his guards couldn't understand, but Zidane heard Kuja in his mind.

"***Zidane, get away from them, now.***"

Zidane promptly moved away from the guard by kicking him in the stomach and he rejoined his brother. Without waiting for the Gaians to move, Kuja shouted, "Flare Star!"

A carnage, a burning house, no survivors and especially no criminals for this crime found; a twisted fate that brought satisfaction to the Genome brothers. They watched from afar as the nobleman's mansion crumbled under the raging flames, wherein his roasted body will be part of the new ruin within the city and his disgusting soul will join the Mist.

The only regret Kuja came with this incident was that they should have stolen the man's wealth before murdering and destroying the mansion. If they did, perhaps they would have acquired enough wealth to become true nobles.

Thanks to this strange experience, Kuja discovered the meaning behind the word "hooker"

and the concept of prostitution. Even if this meant easy money by selling their bodies to provide body pleasure to another, Kuja refused to ruin his own body or his brother's for the sake of money. They will never stoop that low for such puny things like riches. They were special Genomes. They were Angels of Death!

Funny, though. This was also how Zidane learned the concept of "modesty". While Kuja already possessed some level of it programmed into him, growing under his older brother's care for his entire life didn't help Zidane as the siblings had shown themselves bare a lot of times without shame.

Well, thanks to this, they had learned more of the Gaian culture.

It was during another daily stroll that they took interest into the widest structure of Treno. Standing over a clear crystal lake and opened to the public, the place welcomed a crowd from all countries. Kuja had taken notice of this place before, but he paid no attention. However, the bigger gathering grabbed his curiosity this time. Zidane had never been too keen of crowded area, which might be why they never put more interest into this place, but Kuja had learned that they must get used to being part of a crowd.

Even if Zidane was to become a violent bratty kid again against all these Gaians, Kuja should always be available to control and appease him.

In this crowd, even with several tailed Burmecians present, Kuja and Zidane's tails did not go unnoticed.

And this was what Kuja wanted; to be noticed.

Kuja was taught this stadium hosted a great card game competition the Gaians called Tetra Master. This might be the most popular game among the sentient creatures of this planet, whether they were collectors, competitors, casual players, noble people and poor folks alike; a game reuniting everyone as equal opponents wherever they came from. It was a game so huge and grandiose even the leaders of the world sometimes came to this card stadium to compete against the others.

Leaders of the world, right. Exactly who Kuja sought to meet.

But to meet a leader by competing, they must learn how to play this game, a game Kuja had never heard before. Surely, none of the books from their home in the desert ever mentioned the game anywhere, being a game created by the Gaians…

Thankfully, the competition was free of charge. This stadium only served as a way to win bragging rights if one won through all the games, of course. Basic cards were provided to all new players to get a good start. From now on, Kuja decided that he and Zidane will learn how to play Tetra Master. If it'll take years to meet with one leader, then that will be enough for Kuja's plan to begin.

Sadly, the day had yet to come. However, the most unexpected occurred after their first weeks of games.

Kuja's bratty younger brother, the one who he claimed to have a horrible attention span, had discovered his hidden talent for this card game. Zidane had become an expert in Tetra Master among the champions.

Kuja questioned Zidane's talent for Tetra Master. For someone so young and so distracted, how did the child become such a fantastic player? Even Kuja himself, despite his preprogrammed genius mind, could not beat his brother in a simple card game. In all honesty, Kuja was only an average player, winning about half of his games. While Zidane had lost most of his games at first, he quickly rose in ranks the more he played. Months later, Zidane even

came second in one of the biggest yearly competitions involving nobles from around the world, only beaten by a lady from Lindblum. Unfortunately, no leaders were involved in this competition, but Zidane's feat had rarely been accomplished by a child so young before. Child geniuses did exist before him, but currently, he was the only boy to rank as one of them.

Thanks to Zidane's newly found talent, people had begun to take interest into that tailed kid prodigy in Treno along with the tailed young man accompanying him all the time. People assumed Kuja to be his father, and when asked about it, Zidane tossed the comments away and corrected them by revealing that Kuja was actually his older brother. Since Zidane's rising popularity among Tetra Master's players and even beyond, Kuja and Zidane were soon known in the city as the famous Tailed Brothers.

Since then, rumors about them began to circulate among the citizens, some claiming that they were a hybrid of a human and a monkey. Another rumor that had yet to be confirmed was that they were outstanding magic users, which coincidentally was true for Kuja. Whether the rumors were of negative or positive natures, they amused Kuja.

Soon, outside this card stadium, nobles paid them riches just to try to take on the tailed kid, believing that a child could not defeat an adult in this card game. Unfortunately, Zidane won most of the games. Of course, he could not win all games, but most of the wins by the nobles were achieved by pure luck.

But one day, along their moments of games and times spent with competing against nobles, something was about to take another turn when a wealthy old Human lady invited them for a game to her home, above Treno's most famous Auction House.

When Zidane and the old noble lady sat together around the golden table, ready to start their card game, Kuja took a stroll around the immense living room, checking upon the sumptuous décor with pleased eyes. As in many past nobles' houses and mansions, there was a guard following Kuja wherever he walked. Kuja assumed this was a protective layer to avoid any thievery act or worse from any guest. Yet, having been the guests of so many noble houses recently, Kuja was used to the

careful eyes the guards were giving him. Today was no different.

However, a voice in his mind brought him away from admiring the well-carved furniture he'd been looking at. "***Kuja, she always smiles at me. I don't like her.***"

As if a silly joke was crossing his mind right now, Kuja chuckled, earning an odd blinking eye from the guard following him. The man questioned Kuja's sanity for laughing suddenly in the middle of nothing. "***Don't worry. Just play along,***" Kuja told Zidane remotely, not the least worried.

"So…" the lady began, keeping up with her soft smile while adopting her most calming voice like she'd been tenderly caring for lost children. 'Boy, you and your brother are known to all as the Tailed Brothers, but we have yet to learn of your name.' She put up her first card on the table and she gazed at the child with the warmest of the eyes. "Would you be so kind to introduce your name to me?"

Narrowing his brows in confusion, Zidane pouted at the request. He appeared rather uninterested and unimpressed by her. Hesitantly, he laid his first card on the table while he said, "Zidane."

“Interesting, Zidane,” the old lady commented on the boy’s answer, amused by his lack of interest. Flicking through her deck of cards, she replaced each card carefully with her fingers, thinking of her next card move. “Don’t you have a surname? Certainly, Zidane is only your first name, right?”

Once again, Zidane became lost in daze at the question. Did Gaians really have the habit to be given two names? This was a strange concept which shut him into silence.

Knowing the child was not willing to give a proper answer, she still had not shifted from her calm stance. The lady put her second card, at the same time asking, “And would you like to introduce me to your brother’s name?”

It was only now Zidane noticed the lady’s second card had actually bested his first card. Stunned by his first lost, Zidane stuttered for an answer. “Huh… K-Kuja…” he said, not paying much attention to the rest of his deck and he pushed a random card at a random case.

“Kuja, that’s a sweet name,” she hushed as she put her third card, which, strangely enough, had not touched any other cards. “You know, I might be old

and cranky, but I find him to be a very good-looking young man, like an angel from heaven."

Kuja overheard their conversation and he pondered, lost in thoughts. He had heard the notion of heaven before, but he knew this was nothing but a tale to one with a privileged knowledge of the planets' cycle. Heaven did sound like an appealing afterlife, but unfortunately, he was aware where death led a soul to.

Unexpectedly, the lady continued to praise on Kuja's endearing appearance behind his back. "Yes, delicate-looking features, long soft hair, pale complexion… You know, Zidane, Kuja looks so much like my old best friend."

Now, this was getting intriguing. This might be a useful knowledge, to Kuja, at least.

"B-Best friend?" Zidane asked, more disoriented and not paying much concern to anything anymore. As he put his third card, he just discovered it was devouring up most of the lady's cards. The child was now leading the game, and joy rushed through him. "Yes!" he exclaimed with pumping fists up.

"Yes, a dear, beautiful young man, long ago…" the woman reminisced of her past, her caring calm

turning into nostalgia when she seemingly lost herself in thoughts. However, her fourth card was placed with a certainty, away from the others cards like she was confident to win. “We were going to get married, but he had been killed in combat during the old war.”

“Oh, okay,” the boy said simply, unsure what kind of answer the old lady had expected from him. She was speaking of complex subjects and it was too much for him. He laid his fourth card, which won over two cards in a combo attack, but he couldn’t get himself to feel delighted about his current lead. “***Kuja, help! She noisy!***” he begged his brother in their minds so he will continue this complicated conversation with the woman in his stead.

“This is a rather regrettable story.” Kuja finally came to the rescue, sparing Zidane of more speech. Now Zidane could focus on the rest of the game, except with what to expect, he wasn’t sure where his last card should be put on the board. He had lost so much focus over the lady’s blatant speaking that he no longer was certain to win this game. Kuja continued, “I apologize for your loss.”

“Oh, no, it is I who is sorry!” the lady kindly protested, turning to Kuja. “I am the one who’s been

ranting about the past. It's been so long. You both were probably not even born yet." She threw her last card which appeared to be the most powerful one. That card stole away all of Zidane's cards in a long chain of combos.

Blinking at his last card, Zidane confirmed that he had lost the game. Defeats were rare, but it always brought a disappointed pout over the boy's lips. He let the last card fall over the rest to admit defeat.

But the woman had not let her smile go. She did not look happier or sadder of her win. She patted on the child's head, saying, "Zidane, you should have won. Your cards were far superior than mine, but my advice is that you should never listen to your opponents' ranting, whether they are sincere or not." She then blushed with her next statement. "You know, I used to be a Tetra Master champion back in my younger years, but in these days, I am nothing but an old wealthy noble woman."

This certainly was a special old lady. With everything she had told them so far, she seemed to be filled with experiences.

Exactly the kind of person Kuja pursued and needed.

If everything went well, he might be able to influence her enough to let her teach them everything they must know about Gaians.

“Milady, may I ask your name?” Kuja asked, this time, putting on the most charming of his soft smiles.

Flustering from Kuja’s words and mannerisms, the lady’s smile turned shy. “My name? People know me as Lady Queen, the owner of Treno’s Auction House. Rare are the ones who know me by my true name. I am Josephine Tribal.”

Author’s note*: To tell the truth, I really suck at Tetra Master. The fact that this mini-game is mandatory during mid-game is one of the reasons I will never attempt a speedrun of this game.*

Yeah, I know the term Anthropomorph is dumb, but I realized FFIX features so many anthropomorphic characters that are somehow still “Humans” in the world of the game (well, except the Burmecians and the Qus). The oddest ones are Baku (looking so much like a furred pig / bat anthro) and Doctor Tot (big beak bird nose with lot of fur

and claws). Even though they got these animalistic features, we still think of them as full Humans.

The Don Corneo scenes from FFVII kinda inspired me for the scene with the nobleman and the Genome brothers, so I'm imagining that nobleman to just look like him, lol.

Chapter 8: King

As always, thanks for commenting!

So, apparently, the owner of the Auction House goes by the simple name of "King", which might be Kuja himself in-game. Guess in this AU, it can be "Queen" instead.

There's also a mention of homophobia in this chapter, but it's from another character's point of view. I'm in no way agreeing with that character and I do not endorse homophobia in any way.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 8: King

There was something strange about that meeting with Josephine Tribal.

The smile she would always display by their presence, as Zidane put it, was not the only fishy detail. That smile had more to it than meet the eyes. The old lady was not simply smiling at them out of a generic happiness, sadness or even madness. It was the type Kuja had only seen on his little brother so

far, one sharing its care for the others. Josephine bore that same sweet smile like she was a loving mother or some sort of caregiver.

Well, she did tell about the loss of her lover from a long time ago, a young man who appeared to be the spitting image of Kuja, supposedly. The concept of marriage seemed to have taken such an importance on her that she still remembered her fiancé after all these long years, enough for her to be stuck with the thoughts of that deceased man. Unfortunately, the man she had proposed to was killed in a war.

The same kind of war Kuja planned to impose on Gaia. How ironic…

It was a challenge to make a conception on how one could never get over the death of someone from so long ago. The past was the past, and nothing could be changed. All events that had led everyone to where they were right now were the fruits and mistakes of their past. To Kuja, the only path to follow was to move forward, to try and forge their lives to reach a better end.

How dumb of Gaians to keep on with the memories of the dead and their own terrible pasts. It will only hurt them.

Yes, he recalled all these tortures Garland had shoved upon him for disobeying and nothing will wipe away these awful memories. However, he no longer gave them any concern now that they were out of Garland's reach, at least physically. It was useless to dwell on his past and all he wished was to gain the ability to throw these memories away into some endless abyss.

Yet, it still hurt to think about the past.

For some reason, his thoughts drifted off until they were drawn on his bratty younger brother. Kuja will never forget about all these great times spent with him, wherein they were enjoying their lives together despite Garland's constant monitoring. But these memories were still kept within him because Zidane was thriving in his life right now.

Yet… what if Zidane was lost too? This was a possibility among all the many millions life's choices, just as Kuja had been near to lose him in Madain Sari when they had faced that powerful Eidolon dragon, more than a year ago. Having in mind Zidane's fearless attitude when facing danger, that was an event that might occur at any time during his life. Despite that fateful event that nearly cost Zidane's life, Kuja had never really imagined

what should happen if his little brother was to be lost and then become part of the cycle of souls, again.

Or, if dying on Gaia meant that his soul will turn into a lost byproduct among the Mist…

Wait, how did his thoughts escalate to this? Kuja shouldn’t even be thinking about this! What should matter to him was the present, and nothing more. They were alive and they were planning a war, that was all.

So, that was it. The Gaians had the bad habit of recalling their bad memories, which in turn affected their lives in a way or another. It seemed remembering their loved ones, whether they were alive or dead, could either hurt or soothe them. He wasn’t sure what to think of that concept and how he will find this useful.

However, that finding about that deceased lover was certainly interesting.

That Lady Queen, the very wealthy owner of the Auction House, seemed to project an odd affinity with the brothers. Despite having won the Tetra Master game against Zidane, she paid them for coming to play with her, unlike the other nobles who

would refuse to pay if they claimed their victories against the kid. During the course of the same week, she invited them again to try taking on the prodigy. Yet, following her advice from the last game, Zidane paid no heed to her attempts at speaking, refusing to lose focus again. This time, Zidane won the game, but he was quite shocked to see that the old lady was not concerned by her defeat. However, during the game, Kuja listened to her and he went further into the discussion. Lady Queen asked them few questions, mainly from which noble house they came from (they still wore noble's attires, after all).

Of course, Kuja did all the answering to allow Zidane to concentrate on the game. Besides, Zidane was always lost listening to her. The young man couldn't exactly tell her the truth of their origins, but he did tell her that they were no nobles and that they came from a prestigious palace on the Outer Continent. Few Gaians on the Mist Continent knew of that remote continent, but since there was no means to reach a dead continent, that geographical knowledge was simply lost over time to most Gaians. For now, Kuja and Zidane simply set up a camp in a nearby wood with a Moogle tent.

Outraged by the knowledge of the brothers sleeping in the wilderness, Lady Queen offered them

a shelter for the night in the guest room, but Kuja declined the offer. After that incident with that obsessed, sex driven noble who had mistaken them for prostitutes a while ago, he could not trust her now. However, Kuja's refusal didn't deter Lady Queen from appreciating their presence and her caring stance toward them did not change. Keeping her motherly smile, she paid them for the game as promised and let them go.

Few days later, she invited them for a third game and, as expected, Zidane won again. However, this time, she requested them to stay for dinner. Whenever food was involved, Zidane was always too happy to join. After all, neither Zidane nor Kuja could cook. They had been used to all the disgusting synthetic food of Terra, plain roasted meat from their preys or simple fruits found in the Gaian wildlife, which were just enough to keep them sustained. Anything cooked by talented chefs of noble houses were quite the addition to their diet.

When they saw the food on the table, Zidane was so pleased he crouched over, his tail wagging contently left and right. He was about to jump on the great feast on the table, ready to devour all he could like a feral animal until Kuja intervened from within

their connected minds. "***Remember to use the utensils,***" he told his brother.

Frozen on the spot, Zidane eyed Kuja with a gulp, horrified by the idea of using useless tools to eat such amazing foods available to the open. If Kuja had not stopped him from reaching the food, the boy would have already shoved some down his throat. Calmly but awkwardly, Zidane sat on one of the chairs, taking the one just besides his brother. His hands slowly made their way toward a fork and a butter knife and the boy stared at them in confusion, unsure how he should even use them. Wanting an answer, he drew his eyes to Kuja who, despite his refined allure, was having a hard time trying to hold a fork appropriately.

Having lived isolated from Gaians for so long had taken a toll on them. As Kuja struggled to pick the food on his plate with his fork, Zidane laughed at him, now tempted to go with the easy path and use his own hands instead of these complicated eating utensils.

But unlike the other nobles who had observed the brothers eating, Lady Queen appeared rather amused by their lack of proper eating etiquette. "I can teach you how to use the utensils," she began without

having reached for the food once. Zidane glared at her, wondering why she still hadn't touched the food in such hungry moment. "Perhaps the culture on the Outer Continent differs from the Mist Continent and that you don't need them on the Outer Continent?"

Kuja was uncertain how to give an appropriate reply to the question, but Lady Queen's suggestion made him grasp at a startling awareness. Both brothers lacked the manners and etiquettes needed to communicate properly with the other nobles, and thus possibly the leaders of the world too. If this old lady was willing to teach them everything to act as proper nobles, then it was all about convenience for them.

"I… suppose we can use some help," Kuja responded with a polite chuckle. "You quite are right, Milady. We do not use utensils often at home. Perhaps you can teach Zidane some manners too."

"For someone who comes from the outer world but not from a noble house, you speak like a gentleman," Josephine complimented on Kuja before she went back to her flustered, eccentric attitude. "Oh! You both are so amusing and kind! If only I could have you as children of my own, I would rotten spoil you with everything! If I ever had

boys with my fiancé, I'm sure they'd look as handsome and humble as you both!"

This was strange. The Genome brothers never had thought about the idea of having parents before. There had been some ancient period, somewhere vague in the depth of Kuja's memories, where he had once considered Garland like a father figure. That past disgusted him as the hate he had for his master was now so anchored into his core that the simple thought of the old man horrified him. Now, to Kuja, he had merely been raised by his master once upon a time, and nothing more. And despite having been wholly raised by Kuja, Zidane did not see him as a father, but rather as an older brother as they were created by the same android creature.

Maybe the boy wouldn't act so different now if Kuja had been his father.

Kuja did not know why, but all these family notions brought him some warmth.

"Nevertheless, I'm curious," the lady began, still having not touched the food while Zidane had already begun eating most of his plate without paying attention. "How old are you? You both look too young to be sleeping outside in simple Moogle

tents. The wilderness is dangerous outside this city and predators lurk around everywhere."

There was no need to lie about Zidane's age. Despite having been created as a one-year-old infant, his physical growth process went at a slightly slower rate than a normal Gaian Human. However, Kuja was made an adult from the start. If he'd tell anyone that he was a fifteen-year-old person, no one would believe him. He had to come up with something.

"This is a rather sudden question," the young man commented, and Kuja could see the shine in the lady's eyes leaving a little. Nonetheless, Kuja kept up with his usual charming smile. "I am twenty and Zidane is seven."

"This is such a great age difference between two siblings," Lady Queen admitted. "What of your parents? What had become of them?"

Well, he had to come up with another quick lie. "They both lost their lives shortly after Zidane's birth. Our mother died when she gave birth to him." This part earned some clueless glare from the child who had actually listened what Kuja had said, but he immediately went back to his food. Kuja will have to explain later that this was all a lie so they could

pass as simple Gaians. “Our father was caught in a violent storm and taken away soon after. Zidane and I grew up together since then.”

“Oh… This is such a sad tragedy,” the woman expressed with a heartbroken pout over her lips. She even shed a tear to this generic made-up tale.

On their fourth meeting, Lady Queen surprised them with another dinner without involving any card game. Of course, with the success of their latest sumptuous dinner with the amazing food, they accepted to come. After Josephine and Kuja’s boring speech of everything, the most unexpected came out of their discussion.

“Kuja, Zidane, would you like to be part of the Tribal House?”

Learning of Josephine’s past love had been more than fruitful. He had been charming the lady more than enough with praises and beautiful words. The old woman had been too kind with them, always offering them the smile they had never gotten from their creator, teaching them nobles’ ways and offering them shelter, which the brothers had always refused so far. She was all the opposite of what they knew of Garland, like a true, caring mother.

If only they had experienced a normal Gaian life with a caring parent or two, everything might have led them to a completely different path. Perhaps right now, they wouldn't even be trying to conceive a war to bring death upon the world.

If only…

Yet, this might be too late to save them from their Angels of Death madness.

The request had to be expected which Kuja saw as the most convenient asset for his plan to meet a leader. However, he hadn't expected it to come so soon. No matter, the timing could not be more perfect and this might propel them to their goal to be free and to rule the world faster than ever.

"Huh… what?" Zidane questioned the woman's request, not even sure how this was entitled to him.

"My, this is a rather… unexpected turn of the tide," Kuja said, acting like he was shocked. "Do you mean you want us to work for you?"

"No, no, of course!" Lady Queen insisted, trying to keep her dignified posture and blocking part of her enthusiasm. "I mean… if you want… You both grew up without any parents, and… I want you to… be part of my family…" The breathing slowing

down, she had to take a greater inhalation to avoid choking. “I’ll make you comfortable at home, I’ll teach you everything you’ll need to know to be a proper noble and… and…”

“You want to adopt us. Is that what you mean?” the young man said, softening his shock and giving her the softest of the gazes.

The woman blushed as she commented. “Adopting… I guess you could mean that…”

Coughing under his breath, Kuja lowered his gaze. This undecided act was everything but the truth. He could not tell her an answer right now as this will raise too much suspicion. He had to act humble and uncertain. “We’ll… have to think about this,” he said, his smile slowly leaving but his soft side remained. “I cannot decide now. I will have to speak with Zidane first.”

The rest of the dinner went toward the awkward direction, with them discussing how being part of the Tribal family should be like and how they will become wealthy and noble. Her obsession with the brothers seemed to go a little too worrisome. Even when Kuja tried diverting the conversation to something else, the subject was always drawn back on how they will settle well in her family. It was

clear her mind had been set from the start on having them as her own sons, even if there was no blood relation between them. All this felt unhealthy and strange, but Kuja knew he had to take advantage of that.

Well, as long as her obsession will not turn into something involving a need for sexual perversion, they will be fine. If it ever came to such vile things or if something was getting in their way, they will simply dispose on that. No Gaians could take on them, after all.

Behind everyone's back, Kuja had already taken his decision. It was now time to explain Zidane what they were getting into.

And this was how the Genome brothers became nobles of Treno.

It took about a week for Zidane to fully grasp the concept of family. It was an idea that had already been familiar to him thanks to the sibling love he shared with Kuja, despite not being related by blood, technically speaking. He never had any thought of an extended family beyond having a brother. This was a difficult task picturing a family with children,

parents, grandparents and beyond when Genomes such as them were artificially created and not naturally born from two parents. Even his Genome family in which Garland called them all siblings altogether was long forgotten by the child who barely recalled his time on Terra anymore.

Because they were part of Josephine Tribal's noble house, they adopted her surname. They were now known in Treno as Kuja Tribal and Zidane Tribal. Josephine Tribal had become a new "mother figure", though none of the brothers called her a mother, at least not yet.

Both brothers adapted quite well in their new lives as nobles, though Zidane's ill-mannered ways gave Lady Queen some troubles at first. The bratty boy thought life under the Tribal house was boring, with receiving knowledge from a personal tutor and learning how to act like a noble. Zidane would rather slip outside and explore the nearby woods alone. Once, his trip ended as far as to the Southern gate which was about an hour of run away from Treno's limits. No one was able to find him and everyone worried of Zidane's disappearance except Kuja who reassured his new servants that his brother was going to be fine.

Oddly enough, whenever Zidane was lost, Kuja was the only one capable to find him. Of course, no one knew his secret on how they'd always find each other if one was to disappear in this strange, periodic game of hide-and-seek.

Another bizarre aspect was how the servants seemed to like Zidane's carefree attitude which differed him greatly from most of the other noble children. Zidane didn't particularly like to be around the servants, but he didn't treat them any different from everyone else, whether they were nobles, poor folks or servants. To him, they were people, simple as that, and that was all that mattered to him. However, with time, Zidane learned to live around without paying attention to any of them until one would call him on behalf Lady Queen or Kuja to come for dinner, to take a bath or to partake boring lectures. At first, the boy would not listen, but after few scolding from Kuja, Zidane learned to listen to the servants with more respects than any normal nobles would offer them.

Over the first months, they were taught how to speak and act like a noble, which didn't seem like a problem to Kuja who had a natural way of speech and mannerisms. It probably was something Garland had implemented in him during his creation.

However, while Zidane learned to be tamer during the more convenient moments, he could not stand quiet for long. When they visited other nobles, when Kuja and Josephine would go on speeches forever, Zidane would slip out of the places and wander outside, even once having to fight two criminals intended on ridding him of his riches when they had noticed he was a noble child. Normally, Zidane would kill them out of defense and fun, but Kuja had advised he better just beat them to not cause any unnecessary ruckus. After long days, they were finally able to use proper utensils like true gentlemen, though Zidane sometimes skipped them by using his hands, much to Kuja's despair. Lady Queen mocked that the boy will never find a girlfriend when he will grow up if he kept up with such manners, a comment that Zidane ignored because, as a child, finding a mate was the least of his worries.

As Zidane was still too young, Kuja was the only one who was taught how to foresee their Auction House for any counterfeit objects and the value of things as this will be the business they will eventually have to take over in their later lives. Thanks to this, Kuja learned more about monetary value, a fact that might be needed later.

Surprisingly, Kuja discovered a new hobby he shared with their new “mother” which involved fashion. Kuja had already drawn his interest in types of clothes before, but this time, both him and Lady Queen took their sweet time before their wardrobes, struggling to find their best outfits for the day. He began to force some attires upon Zidane who contested at first but then decided that Kuja was the better connoisseur in cloths, so everyday, he’d let Kuja choose outfits for him. Sometimes, Lady Queen and Kuja teamed up together to comb each other’s hair, even Zidane’s who would always pout and sulk in defeat whenever they combed his hair and tail. Obviously, Zidane had no care for appearance.

When he noticed few servants and Lady Queen taking time to apply makeup on their face, Kuja became intrigued. He had noticed people with makeup before, but he didn’t realize the idea could be applied on him to make himself more appealing. The first day Kuja tried to apply makeup on his visage was a disaster, but he was taught from another servant and Josephine how to properly make himself more beautiful with it.

Lady Queen had first been joyful to see Kuja’s excitement over fashion and appearance, but the joy

was slowly turning sour when she realized that such passion for fashion and makeups was an attitude more akin to women. With Kuja's seemingly lack of interest in women right now, their "mother" was worried that her new "son" might divert to another path she did not want for him. That fashion idea seemed to have gone too far when one day, Zidane began to call his big brother a girly girl, which did not bother Kuja at all, much to her shock.

Kuja couldn't be into men, couldn't he?

No, that was a thought to be tossed. Kuja seemed too perfect for this.

Thanks to Lady Queen's experience with Tetra Master, Zidane got to learn more advices and new strategies. Kuja was taught more about the other noble houses and the royalty across the Mist Continent. All this knowledge will surely come in handy in time, sooner or later.

Soon, they weren't simply known as the Tailed Brothers, but as full-fledged nobles of the Tribal House, one of the most prestigious houses of the entire Alexandrian country. For them having rose from nobodies to powerful nobles in such a short period triggered other rumors about them, mainly that they descended from powerful gods out of this

world. No normal folks on Gaia should be able to accomplish such a feat.

According to the servants, the insertion of the brothers in the Tribal noble house seemed to have uplifted the mood of their Lady Queen. Kuja was told she used to be moody, always on the verge to mistreat her servants and even others in a way or another by threatening them with harassment, sometimes a salary cut or firing them when she was bored. This was something that Kuja could have never guessed, considering her sweet, motherly attitude with the brothers. She had only begun to change when her attention had been drawn to that tailed child prodigy in the card stadium and the intriguing tailed young man accompanying him.

It was only when Zidane once slipped into Lady Queen’s personal room that Kuja realized her reason for adopting both brothers into her house. The child spotted a grand painted portrait of a long black-haired young man with a refined feminine face. Zidane was startled by the portrait, thinking it was his own brother without the feather and the silver hair. When he saw the date of the painting, however, he realized this portrait had been commissioned long years before both were even born in this world.

So, it was true. This was the young man who had died in a war decades ago. Josephine Tribal truly loved the man of her past to the point she needed Kuja's presence under her roof because he reminded her of her long-lost lover. It was no wonder the lady was being all sweeter with Kuja and stricter with Zidane.

Having this in mind, for a while, Kuja thought their relation with Lady Queen might become unhealthy.

Still, both brothers began to like this peace of life and they soon enjoyed their times under the Tribal house. The old thoughts of craving for companionship had begun to take a toll on Kuja who was suddenly reminded of the epoch when he had been clinging to his only family figure, Garland, even if there was no love and care between the two. The way Josephine looked at him had been so different than Garland had ever done to the point Kuja was overcome with confusion. Zidane took notice of the change in his brother and feared his softening side.

…

"***Do not let him soften.***"

Alarmed by the voice in his mind, Zidane shook his head.

Who told him that? That very deep voice… This was not Kuja, for sure.

Well, whatever.

…

But times changed too. As the brothers were now fully part of the Tribal's everyday life, they were seen for granted. When the servants exhibited more joy with the presence of the Tailed Brothers, Josephine began to see them with another eye. No longer she was the center of attention. No longer people noticed her. No longer people were interested in her chattering.

And when she noticed that Kuja spent most of his free time reading books, she screamed after him and pretended that books will distract him too much from his duty to take over the Auction House. When she noticed Zidane going back and forth freely inside and outside of their mansion and when he started returning to his old bratty ways, she would scream at him to stop acting like a commoner. The first time she did, Zidane had been so close to tear her apart, forgetting about all the great things she

had offered him in the past until Kuja told him to settle down.

Kuja hoped Josephine's tantrum was only a temporary phase, but the servants feared she was going back to her old self, a personality the brothers despised. While this was better than anything Garland had ever been to Kuja, they hated to have an authority screaming nonsenses at them.

But his hopes to retrieve love from a Gaian were lost. The brothers were on their own now.

…

Yet, Kuja still needed Lady Queen's wealth.

It had been so tough telling Zidane to not lose his temper when their mother figure went on a rage, when she screamed at them for whatever reason. They must continue to buy time, even if it took longer than expected, to build up their plan to become independent nobles. This will be the time when she will create a will lending everything to them as her sole heirs to the Tribal noble house.

But then, the unexpected came. The day Zidane rebutted against one of Josephine's crises with Kuja standing behind his brother, she slapped the child hard on the face.

There was a long silence between them.

It was during that silence that the burning rage building from Kuja's depth slowly rose up his throat and then his mind. There came back an old instinct of pure hatred, of treason, where all the great moments spent sharing care and fun with this woman were wiped out of his heart. This was a feeling that hadn't thrived within ever since that meeting with that dragon Eidolon who had been so close to wipe his young sibling out of living existence. That same painful death was all that fucking Lady Queen deserved for hurting Zidane out of nowhere.

His fists were shaking with the need to strike back, whether it was with magic or his own knuckles, and yet…

No, he couldn't give in. Zidane still maintained his quiet composure, and Kuja refused to stoop as low as to kill this woman out of revenge.

From the long silence and the cold glares she was being given, Lady Queen narrowed her gaze with a sudden remorse she had never felt with them before.

What had she done?

"I'm so sorry…!"

That was all she could say before she ran away crying.

…

They could easily get rid of her, which Zidane began to think about, but Kuja assured him they should remain nice and calm before her and treat her as their savior from saving them from becoming wanderers. This was all done so they will get hands on her immense fortune. Zidane hated to play the actor, but when he really put himself in, he was actually as talented as Kuja. After all, despite her quirks and split moods, Lady Queen still loved the brothers above all else, a love that had now turned one-sided. One of the older servants affirmed that strange unpredictable, split personality had begun the day since her fiancé had lost his life.

So, they'll have to bear that old wicked personality of her.

Yet, not too long after, Kuja never expected that Lady Queen's past tale to impact on the most unexpected person on Gaia, on the day he discovered Zidane sitting on his bed in their room, crying.

“Zidane…?”

“Huh? Kuja?”

Between his short words and his erratic breathing, sobs and tears emerged. The sight of his crying brother was a strange thing of the past as the last time the boy had ever cried like this dated from their stay on Terra. From the look of his reddened and hardened cheeks, Zidane might have been crying for some while. “What’s the matter?” Kuja asked, trying to adopt his most gentle tone, but obviously, he had never been good at displaying emotions. He kneeled himself to Zidane’s level and laid a hand to his cheek, stroking him to soothe him.

Relieved by the move, the child caught his hand and pulled his head to his palm. Looking straight into his brother’s eyes with his wide, tearful eyes, he asked, “Y-You going to die?”

“W-What?” the young man could only stutter. That question came to him as a surprise.

“If you die, I’ll be alone!”

There was such an odd despair in that voice. Kuja did not understand why and he was taken aback by the sudden rising tone. Left dumbfounded, the older sibling blinked at him for a moment, uncertain what

had just happened. The question went so fast and abrupt that all he could think was what triggered that sudden fear into him. “Why do you say that?” Kuja asked, trying to keep his tone calm to not spur anymore panic from the kid.

While Zidane had never been good with words and especially long sentences, he fought to give his best explanation after taking a long breath. “Lady Queen… She… She have friend like you… when she young, r-right?”

Why bringing up the subject of that dead man from the grave? “Yes, she did,” Kuja said.

“And… t-that friend… die?”

“Yes.”

“And Lady Q-Queen become mad, huh? That what servant s-s-say!”

… Kuja was astounded. Did Zidane really think through all these levels of the lady’s descent to madness? For his entire life, he had expected his short attention for complex subjects could never go as far as to analyze emotions of others and see the consequences of these emotions….

Experiencing a life with a soul from this age will allow him plenty of time to develop emotional growth over the next years.

What? What about emotions?

Why bother? You will see for yourself why this Angel of Death is superior to you.

These words he wished he could have forgotten came to haunt him again. Even to this day, Kuja did not understand why Garland deemed Zidane as the perfect Angel of Death despite the boy's obvious flaws… His attention troubles, his slow learning on how to speak properly and his emotive outbursts whenever Kuja or Mahila were involved… When Gaians saw in Kuja from the outset a perfect young man with the beauty of an angel and the speech of the nobles, all the Gaians perceived in Zidane was a bratty, restless child.

Were all these strange aspects sought from Garland, and thus why he was deeming Zidane as the superior Genome? Kuja could still not understand how these flaws made him superior. After all, after meeting with so many Gaians and using Josephine as his main Gaian reference, emotions truly were a bother and, in some occasions, a complete weakness. If Kuja will ever get hands on

Lady Queen’s fortune one of these days, if he will ever manage to manipulate leaders of the world, that will be when he will succeed to abuse of their emotions, their main weaknesses.

Kuja could think through plans, much better than Zidane had ever achieved. Kuja had the social skill to manipulate people. Yes, the boy was still young, but he might not possess the mindset of a normal seven-year-old Gaian kid. He could even say he was a little behind them, but he couldn’t deny that Zidane’s emotions were developing faster as he grew, unlike his social skills.

With that much emotions, how was Zidane even better than him? How was Garland right? Was Zidane a success and Kuja a failure?

A shiver ran across his skin. He suddenly began to fear Garland’s old words.

“I-I don’t wanna be mad!” the child cried, now shaking his head to get these warm tears out of his cheeks and his eyes. Sinking his head deeper into Kuja’s palm, he yelled, “I don’t wanna see you die! Kuja! Don’t die!”

Kuja was not sure how he should approach Zidane’s outburst. The young man might be the sole

parental figure the child ever had, but in all honesty, he had never been very good at reassuring him. Simply put, Kuja's presence was the only thing that could appease the boy, but he knew words will be needed to soothe him in this dire moment.

Slowly shaking his head, he sighed and put his two hands on the boy's shoulders, prompting the child to look back at him with remnants of sniffles and tears. "I'm not going to die," he hushed to the boy.

"But you can die…" Zidane protested, sniffling one more time.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I will die one day." Kuja felt the sudden tension through Zidane's shoulders and his shaking tail. "Just as you and everyone else. Master Garland had explained this to us. One with a soul is a mortal. You've seen it yourself, when we… disposed of creatures."

Unfortunately, the panic set out wilder on the boy who couldn't stand still. "Kuja!" he cried after him again, gripping to his arms to seek more comfort. "I don't want you to die! I'll be alone!"

Dammit, that kid will never give up… "Foolish brat!" Kuja snarled at him, startled by his own rising

temper. His brother's emotional idiocy was beginning to tire him. "Why do you think I'm going to die?!"

"You just say so!" Zidane shouted back before another bawl surged. "Y-You say everyone will d-die! Means you too!"

The older brother sighed again. "Yes, but this won't be now or soon," he whispered, hoping his softer voice will calm him once more, and he was glad Zidane stopped shaking. "We both still have long years ahead. This will be so long that you will even forget we had this conversation. You won't even think about it soon."

Putting up his best familiar smile, Kuja gently brushed over Zidane's cheeks again with his fingers, comforting the child until he was no longer sobbing. The tears crawled slowly, but the boy was now trusting his brother's nice words. Attempting to give away a smile too, Zidane failed to exhibit a true one, but Kuja knew the child was now better. "Promise me… you don't die…"

Slowly pulling his face closer to Zidane's, Kuja hushed, "I cannot promise this, but I can promise this will not happen soon. We will grow older and

older together until we will live our lives to their fullest. This, I promise."

"Kuja…" the child called again, gently closing his lids. When he opened them, he put up a weak smile.

Without warning, Zidane bounced and caught Kuja by the neck with his tiny arms to give him the warmest of hugs. The older sibling chuckled from the sudden move before he, too, gently wrapped his arms around the boy, offering him some soft strokes on his back. With the relief rushing through both, the young child brushed his cheek over his brother's shoulder, wanting to stay that way for a long, peaceful while. However, Kuja soon made it clear that they had to part ways by gently pulling him away, but Zidane still hung his arms to his shoulders. Tiptoeing, the young boy approached the man until their noses touched. They brushed their noses like a parent and child would, with their tails rolling around the other, living up to this bliss of experiencing this artificial, yet true life. That sibling fondness always soothed them, knowing they will always be together and never alone in their unfair purposes as Garland's pawns, as long as the old man had his eyes set on them.

The child offered few joyful giggles, now certain that everyone he loved will get to live a long, long time despite everything that had led them to this day.

Life was so great.

“Kuja? Zidane?! Wut the hell are you doing?!”

That loud voice behind had taken them by surprise with Zidane suddenly launching and releasing himself away from his brother and Kuja bended backward from Zidane’s jump. They both turned to find the origin of the booming voice that had called them, only to find their noble mother guardian at the door of their room. From the obvious horror plastered on her face, mouth agape and eyes wide with a strange frown, Lady Queen must have been spying on them for some moment.

“Mmm…?” Kuja murmured, not concerned by her presence as he gently caught back Zidane by the shoulders. Yet, Zidane was breathing nervously from the shock of the lady’s presence. However, Kuja’s eyes were slightly wider in shock when he grasped at the reddened face of the woman who seemed to lack balance on her legs. When the pungent smell of alcohol reached to his nose, he knew the lady was not truly in the best of her shapes.

“Were… Were you ruu… rubbing on each other?” the old woman asked, not even bothering to find better words for it. She appeared distressed of what she had witnessed.

Wondering what ran through her mind, the older brother raised a puzzled eyebrow. Clueless, he answered, “We… were…? Why do you ask?”

“What?!” The shock on her face turned into a blend of disgust and anger as she burst her voice louder. The crimson color of her skin caused by the drinking turned even darker as she garbled her words. “But you’re brothers, siblings! How could you… ruuub each other like this?! This is… This is an outrageous act of homosexuality and incest! How the hell can you live with such sins?! You’re… You’re disappointing me greatly, Kuuuja Tribal and Zidane Tribal!”

Zidane despised that sudden annoying attitude from their guardian. He could not grasp on the gravity of her words and terms she had been using, causing him to be tangled into confusion and fury. His old instincts resurfaced when he began to growl at her. Afraid to see Zidane’s feral, murderous side again, Kuja caught him by the shoulders fast as to remind him to calm down which Zidane did, but the

growls of his chattered teeth and trembling throat remained.

Kuja stood back, his strict, unemotional expression taking over, keeping Zidane under his grip and staring at Lady Queen with nothing but a frown. Keeping his cool voice to handle this situation, he started, “Milady, how can you make such claims? I fail to see why you call this an act of homosexuality and incest. There is no sexual drive involved. We were merely displaying brotherly bond to each other. Have you observed the creatures of Gaia? This is the most natural way for them to reassure the others.”

As far-fetched as this had sounded, this had been nothing but the truth. Casted away from the Gaian civilizations most of their lives and knowing nothing else but the Gaian wildlife and the Terran soulless Genomes, by judging Josephine’s reaction, the brothers just realized some of their acquired habits were perceived differently by the sentient creatures. Yes, perhaps among the cultured Gaians, cuddling each other like Kuja and Zidane had done meant one thing, and this was not for displaying a sibling bond, for certain.

But these cultural differences were giving Kuja such a headache with so many conflicts in his knowledge on Gaians. Kuja had seen countless civilized mothers and fathers cuddling their children to soothe them or to maintain their family bond. This was a parental instinct, after all.

So then, why was their bonding act seen as a sin to this woman? Was this because Kuja was Zidane's brother and not a father?

Kuja did not understand Josephine's logic into seeing this as a derogative act, but he could not deny Lady Queen's expression of disgust. He simply hoped this was the effect of the alcohol taking a toll on her, and yet…

"You speak as if we're 'creatures' to the same level as feral animals!" Josephine screamed louder and wilder, like Kuja's words hadn't convinced her of anything. "I don't want to see this disturbing act ever again! Am… Am I clear?!"

This was it. Unable to tame that upcoming instinct, Zidane was ready to launch himself at the woman to tear her apart, if only he hadn't been stopped by Kuja. "Certainly, Milady," the young man responded, still calm, but Zidane could feel Kuja's rising anger when the man's fingers stiffened

with fury on his shoulders. “If you desire that we stop this act, we will. I apologize for our unorthodox manners that disturb you. We still have a lot to learn from you on wisdom and culture.”

“Atta boys! That’s what I want to hear!” Lady Queen commented with a sudden unhealthy joy coming back to her. At last, she left them alone, shutting the door in a loud clasp.

“***Don’t worry about her,***” Kuja reassured his brother using their minds. “***We can say whatever she wants to hear, but she cannot hear us in our connected minds.***”

Zidane laughed.

Life was still great, after all.

Zidane had now reached the age of eight and Kuja was now a true adult himself at sixteen, which their guardian thought of mere twenty-one years old.

They spent their latest months enduring Josephine’s tantrums and personality splits. However, their long wait of holding on their murderous tendencies was worth everything. After nearly a year and half spending their days under the

Tribal House, at last, Lady Queen finalized what Kuja had been desiring from the start.

An official written will lending her immense wealth to the Tailed Brothers, if she was to meet death.

This was it. It was time.

"***Zidane, you will dispose of Josephine Tribal.***"

The following week came with chaos and horror when random folks discovered Lady Queen in a nearby wood, her remains near unrecognizable from all the bite marks and exposed flesh scattered around her death bed in the wilderness. Among the bites of scavenger monsters and the traces of knives wounds on her body, the most obvious cut that had killed her was a nasty wide slice to the throat, where dried blood paint her entire upper body into a dark crimson.

A servant was able to confirm the decaying body's identity from the jewelry found across the murder site. An envelope signed by one of the Auction House guards was discovered close by, where a written letter requesting her presence in the wood for a secret emergency meeting was pulled out. Since then, a certain tall, imposing red haired

man became a wanted man across Treno and the whole Alexandria country for the murder of the infamous Lady Queen.

When a funeral was held for her, each servant gave the noblewoman's inheritors a long glare, wherein both Kuja Tribal and Zidane Tribal stood in silence before Josephine's coffin without any visible sadness. They even spotted a tiny smirk over the child's lips.

From then, they knew the terrifying truth.

The Tailed Brothers had murdered Lady Queen for her wealth, all for Kuja to become the new "King" of the Tribal House.

Author's note*: I've always wondered where Zidane got his "Tribal" last name, since Kuja doesn't have any last name, so my guess is that he got it from someone. So, in the game, it's probably Baku's last name. Or I've read fics where Kuja's last name was Tribal too. So, maybe all Genomes have that last name? Or maybe Kuja self-assigned that name because, at the end of the game, he wants to feel like he's a true family to Zidane?*

Zidane's sudden fear to see Kuja die is based on a moment of my childhood when I realized what death truly was and that eventually everyone will die, including my loved ones. I cried about it for long hours, except that no one saw me so I cried alone. :(

Chapter 9: Capture

Maybe the brothers aren't so bad.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 9: Capture

Fear established among the servants of the Tribal House since the death of Lady Queen.

This certainly was not because of the cold demeanor of their new Lord King. This definitely was not because of the Lord's little brother causing ruckus around which defined him as a free brat and an introvert, lonely boy.

No, rather, it was how awfully nice their new masters were with them. Assuming that they had killed Josephine, their generous and gentle demeanor with everyone arose a fear that their masters were more akin to psychotic murderers rather than spontaneous killers, making them unpredictable about their next targets. Neither this was no laughing matters when the Tailed Brothers were said to be a very powerful mage and a fighter who could easily take on any powerful wild

monsters, a rumor born from travelers having witnessed them taking on random Grand Dragons. Perhaps they could even fight more than ten armed men without shedding their own blood. There were even rumors about them being all powerful gods descending from the sky to slowly destroy this town from within for all the corruption arising inside.

Usually, these silly tales were shared among the poorer classes of this town. Needless to say this time, even the other nobles were terrified of these new powerful, wealthy Tailed Brothers.

What if their murderous eyes were set on one of them?

Unfortunately, some of these rumors were known to be true. Kuja Tribal actually was a fearsome mage capable of high level magics beyond Gaian’s reach. Zidane Tribal, while still young, could slash through the most threatening creatures with his faithful daggers. When they were both bored out of their minds, they’d go to the weapon store to battle rare legendary monsters from unknown worlds the noble owning this store would capture and keep prisoner in the underground arena. Some beasts were told to be even stronger than the Grand Dragons, and the brothers would always come out of the battles

victorious and barely injured, if ever. This rose the fear of the Tribal nobles among citizens in Treno.

However, along this fear to even dare to fight against the Tailed Brothers, there were some advantages of having them as the new Auction House masters.

On the contrary to their former boss Lady Queen, Kuja and Zidane were treating their servants quite well and they even raised their incomes. It was the point anyone working under the Tribal noble house no longer had to worry about their monetary issues. With that much wealth to spare in their hands, they even helped the poorest folks by providing them foods and offering money to help propel them as productive citizens of this city. The poor ones were getting their chances for a better life thanks to these new fearsome, yet generous nobles.

All this gave them the reputation of ones of the most respectable philanthropists to ever walk in Treno.

The Auction House became prosperous as ever under their watch, with new items on sale that could never be found anywhere on the Mist Continent, which drove the rumor of them coming from another world closer to the truth. Few people even pretended

to have witnessed a huge and bright winged beast descending on the imposing Auction House manor roof few times with one of the brothers mounting it. What if that flying creature was their pet from the outer world and they went to fetch the rare items with that beast to unknown places?

And despite the increasing number of rumors about them and their growing reputation in the city, they still had not met any world leader.

Perhaps they weren't working hard enough? At this point, was there a way to work harder to meet a leader? They did everything they could already!

Kuja could not tell if Garland was actually aware of their rising fame among the Gaians, but there was no way the old man could still claim him as a failure after everything Kuja had accomplished. All it took was nothing but manipulative lies and beautiful speeches over these puny Gaians. If Zidane had been alone in this purpose to save Terra, could the child even compete against this?

But this time, in a way, they had needed each other to get to where they were now. One Angel of Death could have not done this alone.

It was becoming a routine among the folks of Treno to see the younger of the Tailed Brothers wandering in the city and even outside alone. He explored the edge of the city plains or even the dangerous forests around the cave of that Qu person living alone. He ignored everyone on the way, whether they were Humans, Burmecians, Anthropomorphs, Qus, nobles or poor ones. The boy craved to find hidden treasures and battle monsters blocking his path when outside. The citizens concluded that inside this little boy hid a fearless adventurer and hero of another world stuck in the body of a child. Unlike the other kids and especially noble children, Zidane Tribal did not require protection. He was perfectly capable of defending himself, even going as far as fighting by himself a group of three bandits who had been trying to steal from the Auction House once.

Zidane was now familiar with his surrounding, knowing all names and faces of each servant under their house, recognizing the diverse faces in the city and even telling apart the wandering feral cats and dogs around. Despite all, he maintained a careful, doubtful eye at everything, meaning he never trusted anyone fully, except Kuja, of course. Unless he was being addressed directly, which very few people

dared to, he rarely spoke to someone. He trusted his skill so he should not worry about the puny Gaians harming him, but he could never be too vigilant.

And speaking of strangers, as he ran outside the city where the sun light began to shine, he discovered a wagon pulled by a chocobo in the middle of nowhere with a lone Anthropomorph looking like a friendly Tapir in some merchant clothes. A merchant around seemed out of place, and yet, that little mouse springing along the long grasses appeared more of interest to chase after. When the merchant spotted the boy, he smiled and waved at him. “Hey, boy, I’ve got something for ya!”

At first, Zidane chose to ignore him as the escaping mouse on the grass was more intriguing and amusing to him. As the tailed child bounced around trying to catch the rodent like a bored kitty, the man called him once more. “Ya there! I heard ya like daggers, right?”

“Dagger” was a word that sparked the child’s curiosity. Zidane had no idea how the man was able to read him, but it was true; the boy loved anything about daggers and knives, from the way they could be held, the carved handles, the colors, their cutting

blades and even their metallic scent. Abandoning the mouse he was pursuing, Zidane turned to the Tapir man with an attentive eye. Having caught the noble boy's interest, the merchant widened his warm smile by showing him one odd sword with two knives on each side, the handle placed in the middle of the two blades. Noticing the marveled sparkles in the child's eyes, the man chuckled.

"This's a 'thief sword' type of blade," the man said. "I've got some more in the wagon behind me. I can sell ya some for a fair price, so I'm ya interested, right, kid?"

Excited to add more of these convenient weapons to his arsenal, the child jumped inside the merchant wagon before a swarm of masked men surged out to jump at him together, each holding his tiny body under their much greater weight. Zidane was going to scream until one of them shoved a wet cloth to his mouth and nose, wherein the intense smell of sweet, cold air filled his nostril and his lids grew heavier by the seconds. The rest of his body slowed down until he could no longer move, and finally, he shut his eyes as his consciousness left him into a deep slumber.

“Lord King, don’t you think your brother has been away for a long time?”

Watching the activity raging in the Auction House from the balconies was a borefest as much as it sometimes was a fascinating play, to observe collectors and nobles fighting over frivolous objects of no use. With the long, disappointing inaction of the auctions today, Kuja was almost too glad that a servant came to interrupt him to speak of something else than business. “Hmm? What news do you bring me?” he asked the concerned servant, completely ignoring he had been told earlier.

“Lord Zidane has gone out of the mansion for some time since this morning and he has yet to show himself again. No one has found him in the city.”

Unable to contain a giggle, Kuja commented, “He’s a wild little brat. He can wander around for all I care. He will be back eventually. He can fend for himself and I trust his skills as a fighter.”

The servant gulped. “But he’s only seven—”

“Eight.”

The soft, yet twisted smile forming on the silver-haired noble brought the servant terror and shiver. After shaking his head to toss that fear out of him,

the servant regained his composure. With a bow before walking away, he said, “I understand, Lord King. I will return to my duties. Please forgive me for my intrusion and concerns.”

With the worries walking away from him, Kuja returned to his duty to watch over the activities of the Auction House. With a sigh, he decided to reach out to his brother with their connected minds. Where had the boy gone this time? “***Hey, Zidane. If you’re going to hide from me, give me a sign of life.***”

No answer. This was to be expected from a bratty child. The young man helped himself with a laugh. His brother was probably playing tricks to scare him again. “***Well, fine. If you want to play the brat, I’ll play the ignorant. It’s none of my concerns.***”

There still was no answer, but there was no need to be worried. Kuja at most should be the one to know this; just as the rumors stated, Zidane was strong enough to protect himself from danger and fight everything. He will show himself soon enough.

“Oh, the kiddo’s waking up, finally.”

“Was about time! They’ve been so close to kill him with that much chloroform! He’s a tiny kid, dammit! We need him alive!”

Like each of his limbs were crushed by heavy weights, Zidane stirred away in slow movements from his painful torpor, one he could not remember getting into. His eyes opening to a world of blur and darkness, he pulled himself on his knees with his trembling arms and he shook his body before he struggled to move on a sitting position. After giving his sore eyes a good rub, he allowed them to get used to the darkness around before he tried to recognize the voices that had spoken during his slow awakening, though he could not make out what they were saying. His blurred vision spotted some candles on a table and two humanoid silhouettes who he assumed where the voices had come from.

When everything came to sharpness around him, the two silhouettes shifted into two male adult Humans, one who seemed to be about Kuja’s age in appearance and one who appeared middle-aged. Strangely, both wore a mask over their faces. However, the two men were the least of his worries. He realized he was not home. Instead, the two men were behind rusted bars, or rather, Zidane was the one trapped behind the metallic bars that reeked a

nasty iron stench with a scent and feeling of humidity. He looked at his hands and legs to find his wrists and ankles prisoners of heavy cuffs linked to solid chains, which in turn were attached to the dark wall. The only light sources were two small flames on meager candles on a modest table behind the two strangers and a tiny sun ray piercing through some blocked small window.

Keeping his calm but his confused, innocent expression never changing, Zidane stared back at the two men, wondering what he had been doing in this dark, smelly place.

“So, you’re finally awake, Zidane Tribal,” the older man called the boy with an odd focus on his noble surname. The stranger lowered to his level with a mocking gesture to show that he had total control over him, though this had not intimidated the child. Not frightened by the man, Zidane retained his glare at him. “Now that you’ve our attention, I’ll explain the situation. You’re in our secret hideout, and we’ve just kidnapped you. You’re following so far?”

Kidnapped. Zidane recalled this term he heard few times before. This was a term he thought to never have to bother with, seeing his greater position

as Terra’s angel along with his brother. However, he was aware of the term’s meaning and his now precarious situation. Being kidnapped meant that he was brought away by a person or several people far from home, far from his family, all against his will. Being kidnapped also meant he was being given a disadvantageous position in this strange shelter with no way to get control of his environment, with his kidnappers having the higher grounds over him.

Being kidnapped meant that if he was a normal Gaian child, he should be scared of his situation right now.

He was not scared, but he had to act like he was.

The passive and innocent expression on the child now shifted into fear and panic as Zidane began to shiver like a livestock without defense before his butcher. He crawled to a corner, avoiding the men’s stare and he crouched into a fetal position, his squinting eyes producing a set of crocodile tears the kidnappers couldn’t differ from true tears.

“We’ll only free you when Lord King will give us the ransom for your freedom!” the man continued, not concerned by the child’s terror. “Of course, that’s if he’s willing to give us the payment! It’s time to see if your darling brother truly loves you! If he

doesn’t, well, we’ll be selling you to another noble! A tiny child with subpar agility, with long silky blond hair, that strange functioning tail and these mesmerizing turquoise eyes… A noble will pay a fortune to get their hands on such living chef-d’oeuvre as a slave! Just imagine his growth potential, when he’ll be a submissive young man!”

“Boss…”

“Oh, and maybe we can sell you to a ringleader! Oh, they’ll make you fight for money! How much are they willing to pay for a fighter like you?”

“Boss,” the other Human called his older partner again. This man seemed to be filled with uncertainty when his sight was drawn to the trembling child in the corner. “I don’t think all this’s a good idea. You just said it earlier. He’s just a kid and he doesn’t look that strong. Are you sure he can fight anyway?”

The older man who called himself “Boss” turned around to give his partner a glare. “You’ve heard the details of Lady Queen’s death? Everyone knows the kid’s the one who’s done this to her! It’s him or that girly big bro of his! This kid may be young and small, but folks have seen him killed huge monster and he can definitely murder things!”

“No!” Zidane yelped in fear, crying his despair. Perhaps he’d been a little overdramatic. He had to tone down his outbursts, returning to his crouching and trembling pose. He stuttered, “I-I didn’t do it… I-I w-wanna g-g-go home…!”

“You ain’t going home!” the boss screamed with a raging tap on the foot, prompting Zidane to shut himself with broadened orbits. He turned away from the crying boy, reaching for the door. The underling Human gave Zidane a somber gaze before he followed the boss and slowly shut the door, leaving the child alone.

From the moment the door was shut, Zidane stopped his act and grinned with a twisted frown. This silly act had been so efficient pride washed all over him for his acting success. However, he couldn’t do anything right now, but he made sure that Kuja will know of his whereabouts.

“***Kuja?***”

“***Zidane? Where have you gone this time?***”

“***I don’t know. Kidnappers kidnap me. I’m in one dark room.***”

Zidane felt the shock and worry in Kuja’s mind. “***You’ve been kidnapped? How did this happen? I***

thought you were stronger than that."

Lost in thoughts, Zidane tried remembering the events that had led him in this dump. Scratching his head, he said, "***I think… they make me sleep. I wake up here after sleep.***"

"***Oh, right. I guess we're not immune to forced sleep spells and medicine.***" Zidane experienced the depth of thoughts from his brother. "***Thankfully, since you're up now, I know you're okay. You need to tell me where you are.***"

"***I don't know. I'm in dark room. Closed window, I can't see outside.***"

"***Well, in that case, you should simply kill your assailants and come back home.***"

"***Can't do that, Kuja. I have chains to my arms and legs. Can't go far!***"

Kuja should have expected this, but he didn't think the kidnappers could have gone that far as to put a puny little child under chains. No normal child should have to wear them when they would not be able to move much with these. This situation was becoming worrisome but this was the weirdest part of it.

Kuja did not detect distress in Zidane. Was he faring alright?

"***Why did they kidnap you?***" Kuja inquired.

"***Hmm, they say ransom and payment, or something. What's a ransom?***"

"***A ransom?***" This time, the fears left the young man who stifled a sneer on place, though Zidane could not hear it. "***Now this is getting rather interesting. A ransom is when one offers any kind of payment or things in exchange of someone's life from enemies. This means your kidnappers will ask me part of our fortune to get you freed. Whether they will follow up with the exchange will be up to them, but I know I am a man of words.***"

Kuja sensed Zidane's confusion over his long explanation, but this was to be expected from a boy of short attention. "***You and I will no longer have to worry about it,***" the young man shared with a laugh. "***They will keep you alive if they want a ransom. This means I will soon receive a message about your capture, and then a note of what they wish in exchange for you. Since you cannot escape and you don't know where you are, I beg you to be careful until I can come to get you back. I don't know how long this will take, but don't be reckless***

and please, only kill when the necessity comes. As soon as I get the official message, I will let you know and I will depart for you. I hope you are not scared of your situation, alright?"

Zidane laughed. "***No! I'm not scared! They weak! I can kill them!***"

Having the confirmation that his little brother was fine, Kuja gave away a chuckle. "***I trust you can fend for yourself until I can get you out of there. Do not kill your kidnappers yet, or this might get problematic. Wait until I am there. Of course, if they get too hostile with you, you can kill them, but if they treat you well, just let them be for now. I should see you in few days.***"

"***Okay, I be good boy!***"

"***Good. Until then, I'll wait for the ransom request.***"

This was sounding odd, but Zidane might find some fun in it. He didn't know how, but in the end, he will be rewarded with some fun, he was certain of it. Few days might be a little long in this dark room, though. Thanks goodness for this remote communication feature with Kuja.

Suddenly, the door where the two Humans had left earlier opened. The same shyer young man with the mask emerged, and Zidane knew he had to revert to his scared self and bring back his fake tears. As the young man came closer, Zidane noticed a plate of cooked meat and good-looking fruits with a glass of water in his hands. “This’s for you, kid,” the man hushed to the trembling child, trying to appease him. He kneeled himself and he gently pushed the plate and the glass on the ground under the small gap of the cell. “I’m giving you my meal for the day. I also tried getting you the best fruits in our supplies. It’s the least I can do for you. Hope you’ll enjoy it.”

After a last sniffle, Zidane gave the plate a long, innocent stare before he gazed back at the man, unsure what to make out of this generous offer. He wasn’t actually in need of food or sustenance right now, but he had not expected him to be all kind. And there he thought all the kidnappers were one-dimensional evil bad guys who only had money and profit in mind, like so many nobles and even the poor folks in his city, inducing him to hate most of them.

But this man didn’t seem bad. If he was true to his act, then why was he a kidnapper too?

“If everything goes well, your brother should come in few days,” the young man said. “We sent the request to Mognet few hours ago so they will deliver the letter to your brother. The Mognet system can be slow sometimes, but I paid them for an express delivery. Lord King will know your location maybe in two or three days.”

Well, his day to freedom was coming faster than Zidane had expected.

Hesitantly, the boy approached the food plate. He gave it another look before he grabbed the apple. It was big, juicy-looking and all shining. The man must have cleaned it for him. Zidane took a bite of it and lost focus on the man as he finished the delicious fruit. Satisfied, the man raised back on his feet, returning to the door. “Don’t worry,” he said, all calmly. “The boss might sound scary, but he doesn’t intend on killing you, and I’m sure your brother will come here as fast as possible. Until then, I’ll make sure you’ll be okay.”

As soon as the man stepped out of the room with the door closed, the young Genome reverted to his natural, twisted persona again, grinning with a malicious intent on killing his kidnappers when Kuja will come.

The child prisoner counted three more men among his kidnappers, making five men in total, though four were underlings of one human master, or rather, their “boss”. The underlings were three Anthropomorphs, one looking like a very tall and buff Ox, one with the appearance of a Bird of prey and the last one with the allure of a heavy Tapir who Zidane recognized as the merchant who had lured him into this trap. The last underling was a Human, the same kind and shy young man who had given Zidane a great meal which the child had actually devoured with delight. Whenever they came in the dark room, they were all wearing a mask to hide their identities from the child noble who might order a hunt against these men if he knew who they were, after his freedom.

Because of this, Zidane did not know their names but he took the convenient habit of calling each of his kidnappers by their main physical features of their respective animals, naming them Ox, Bird and Tapir. As for the two Humans, he went with “Boss” and ‘Human’ with the underling one. That habit of calling the last man “Human” raised some suspicion about the Tailed Brothers’ mysterious origins and whether they were human or a totally different

species from another world as the rumors would suggest.

Nevertheless, this gave the men an idea. They acquired Zidane's own habit of calling each other the same way as the child's in order to avoid calling each with their real names accidentally.

Over the few days that had seemed slow to him, Zidane had learned to know a bit of each kidnapper. He could hear Boss brag about their fame and money all the time, but he never actually came to visit Zidane, saying that he hated kids and the sight of them disgusted him. Instead, it was his underlings' task to feed their prisoner. When Tapir or Bird came to bring him food, it was always some plain bread with a small glass of water. Not only he wasn't given enough to keep his stomach from growling with hunger, but they never addressed him with any words like he was a mere caged bird part of the furniture. Keeping his scared act with them had been the easiest.

However, things differed much when it was time for Ox to come.

This buff man's hatred for kids seemed to be exposed on the outset more than the others. The first time Ox came to bring Zidane the meager plate, he

put the food closer to the rusted cell. When the child came to pick it, the man kicked him hard on the nose to the point Zidane yelped in fear and shock with two bleeding nostrils and the constant taste of iron inside his mouth. As the kid crouched in pain further away in the corner crying, Ox burst out of laughter before he kicked the plate, causing the food to drop and scatter on the floor in an unappetizing mess.

This was the only time Zidane was about to drop his innocent, scared act to snarl and roar at him, but he remembered he had to learn to compose himself, especially in such dire situations.

Thankfully, when everyone else had been darkness to him, there was a light. Human seemed to be the only one without an actual evil intent.

From Human’s kindness, Zidane came to be intrigued by him. Thanks to him, the child was never stuck in complete darkness. Human always brought a lit candle or two to never allow full darkness to scare the boy. Sometimes, he’d even go unblock the only tiny window when the sun was bright. Even though Zidane was in constant communication with Kuja with their telepathic link, Human decided to spend minutes, sometimes hours, to stay with the child so he was not alone. Of course, Human did not

know about the Tailed Brothers' power to communicate with each other via their minds, and Zidane seemed to appreciate Human's efforts.

And knowing Zidane's reputation as a Tetra Master prodigy, Human even brought cards to provide the child some entertainment so they played together. Of course, the young man was a decent player, but Zidane won most of the games against him. All these games and victories brought smiles to the boy, and it brought smile to Human as well.

Since then, Zidane did not realize that he had been dropping his act with Human, and how he'd act with him was all about sincerity and truth.

Zidane liked Human.

After days, Zidane had learned to know more of Human, how he came to be part of the thieves' group, something about having been forced into hiding when he saw nobles executing his older sister for owing them money but having never giving it back. All this happened when Human was about Zidane's age, and since then, having never known the fate of his parents and the rest of his family, he'd been forced to rely on thievery to survive with no one to support him. That was until he was recruited by his current Boss recently.

As the newest recruit, corruption hadn’t taken over him at all, and kidnapping Zidane was something he had been against from the start. This was why Human felt like he had to be responsible for the child’s wellbeing, though he’d always apologize when he could not come to visit him.

Naturally, Zidane had begun to open up to Human, knowing that the young man had been speaking to him with the truth. The boy bragged about Kuja and how awesome he was, even though he hated the way he dressed and applied makeups like a girl sometimes. He also mentioned how he liked Mahila. When Human asked who Mahila was, Zidane told him she was a super awesome, big, fluffy Silver Dragon. Human questioned himself about this as he was not aware that Silver Dragons existed and that they were only a legend. No dragon as such had ever been spotted on the Mist Continent as far as he knew, except in old books of legends and fairy tales.

This might confirm the rumor about the Tailed Brothers coming from another world…

This time, it was now or never to get the truth out of the child.

“Hey, Zidane,” Human asked the child once during one of their discussions. “Are you a Human?”

“No.” Zidane’s answer was surprisingly spontaneous and the smile on his face was swept away fast with his added comment. “I’m a Genome.”

Human seemed to be taken aback by the answer. Was this why he and his brother possessed a tail? Why did he look sad about it? “What’s a Genome?” the young man questioned, clueless.

“Huh?” Zidane stared at Human, unsure what the question meant. “I’m a Genome?”

Of course, as a young child, Zidane was unable to give a proper explanation on what a Genome truly was. It was the same as to ask a human child what a Human was. Perhaps was a Genome a Human with a tail?

Still, Zidane’s statement seemed to reveal quite a bit on his origins, though Human had more questions crossing his mind than answers now. However, the man decided it was better to keep the whole Silver Dragon and Genome things for

himself. Telling others that the boy was not an actual Human might cause ruckus among his partners…

Today was the day. Kuja told his brother he should be arriving with the ransom soon, which was a written note delegating a quarter of his wealth to the thief group which the five men should be able to use to get their new fortune.

Human had told him five days were spent in this cell. Thanks to Human's intervention, his days were not spent in boredom and rage and he had even been able to entertain himself when Kuja was not available in their telepathic link. While Zidane couldn't say his days in the cell were better than the boredom of staying in their great manor, there was something he missed from home, and it was his brother's physical presence. Speaking to him with their connected minds was not the same as meeting up face to face…

"***Zidane, I'm in front of the door. I'll leave all the fun to you and I trust you're ready.***"

"***Yay, Kuja! Can't wait!***"

When the group heard the soft knock on their hideout entrance door, a thrilling rush waved through the kidnappers, knowing who they were going to meet. When Boss faced a silver-haired young man with a furred tail swaying left and right in a slow, religious and calm rhythm, his smile was turning into a wide grin behind his mask. The other masked men followed their Boss, staring at the famous, newest Treno noble dressed in his quite revealing, feminine-looking attire, not something they'd expect from someone with a bratty little brother.

Oddly, no one else seemed to accompany Kuja Tribal; no guards, no servants, only the noble himself. The group had expected him to have few guards following behind, but perhaps the noble was too dumb. They heard of Kuja's magic prowess, but there was no way he could take on five armed men who could fend for themselves.

Still, the smile on the young noble exhibited the confidence he possessed despite knowing his brother's life and death situation.

"You got the money, kiddo?" Boss asked as his excitement set in.

Blinking for a moment after being taken aback by the comment, Kuja regained his composure to laugh softly. “How rude,” the nobleman asserted as he stifled his laughs. “No greetings? No welcoming fanfare? Fine, fine, but if my memory serves me right, I have made the assumption that you have requested a piece of paper with my signature, and not money.”

Kuja’s sarcasm and delicate mannerisms brought the Boss infuriation. After taping his foot like an angry child, he snarled, “Don’t play dumb games with me! If you want to claim your bratty brother safe and sound, just give us your official note delegating the quarter of your fortune!”

“Bratty brother?” the tailed noble repeated after Boss, having struggled to imitate his gruff tone, which he failed but felt amused by it. This did not please the leader at all. Kuja coughed another fit of giggles. “Ha, ha, ha! How can you make such claims? I can assure you, Zidane Tribal is such an angel I cannot tell if we are speaking of the same brother.”

Hating to be mocked by this nobleman, Boss strived to make himself more menacing by lowering his tone of voice with a growl. “You don’t have the

written note, don’t you? You do know what will happen to Zidane if you don’t bring that written note to us?”

“Hmm? What?” Kuja rolled his eyes around like a clueless man before he snapped back to reality at the grumpy boss. “Oh, I must apologize for my ignorance. I have truly believed that you were speaking of another brat. Please, you must forgive me! After all, this is my first time dealing with a kidnapping AND a ransom, you know? How can sentient creatures of this world stoop so low…”

“Shut up!” Boss screamed, his hands now fists that really wished he could give that silver-haired noble a hard punch on his delicate-looking face. Oh, how he’d like to see his feminine face ruined by blood. “If you don’t comply, we’re going to sell your boy away, don’t you forget! Do you realize how much this tailed boy can be fetched for?! Such a weak, malleable, yet stunning creature from beyond! With the profit we can gain from him, we won’t even need your fortune!”

Oh goodness. How stupider could this leader get? Kuja felt too powerless to stop his giggles now. “Weak? Malleable? Stunning?!” the older brother sang out in a melodramatic tone. “Oh, right! Ha, ha!

We do speak of the same little brother of mine! Well, then…" The young man went for his handbag and took out a piece of folded letter before he handed it to Boss who immediately grabbed it with excitement. "Here is your precious delegation note you coveted with a burning passion. So much for a piece of paper."

Boss unfolded the letter, with Ox and Tapir looking at the contents from behind with wide eyes. Their smiles broadened as they read. Victorious with a pumping fist up, Ox exclaimed out loud, "We've our fortune, finally!"

"We're rich!" Tapir cried with Ox. "It even got the official Tribal family's seal!"

Trying to contain himself, Boss took a long inhalation before he shot a glare at Bird, ready to shout an order. "Great! You release the crying brat! We're holding on to our fair exchange!" With a nod, Bird went to the room in the back.

From this moment, Human noticed a strange, twisted smile forming over the nobleman's lips. With the knowledge acquired over the thievery experience, he knew this was not an overjoyed smile.

No, this was the smile of a very calculating mastermind knowing exactly what will happen next.

He was now scared.

“Ah, ‘fair exchange’. I hardly call this fair,” Kuja commented, his cold smile opening barely enough to let his tongue brush on his lips with a strange satisfaction. “We can make it fairer, for entertainment purposes.”

Shocked by the latest three words from Kuja’s statement, Ox, Tapir and Boss glared at him at the same time, blinking. “Entertainment purposes?!” Tapir asked, raising an eyebrow.

Before the kidnappers could add another word, a loud scream from the back room cut them short from their brief victory. With three men turning around toward the direction of the room where the boy was held, Human was the only one who glared at Kuja who was not startled by the scream at all. His cold smile frozen on place, the nobleman knew precisely what was happening. His arms folded, Kuja waited for the unseen spectacle to move out of the room to reach him soon.

Panic and courage rushing in at the same time, Tapir dashed to the room, unsheathing his two

daggers while Ox and Boss hesitated to join their friends. However, from where they stood, they heard the horrific noises of a gruesome battle fought in that dark room, from which another scream followed. “Bird! W-What’s happening?! Oh, gosh… Oh! No! Pleasepleaseplease! Nononono! Arrrgh!”

Then Tapir’s screams dropped mute.

Hearing the silver-haired man’s chuckles from behind, Boss and Ox began to shiver, near terrified to watch the nobleman. When they turned around, they distinguished on his expression the enjoyment of the torture Kuja did not see but heard.

“Yes, I should tell you,” Kuja began, his smirk giving the men a terrifying shiver down their spines. ‘Zidane is truly an angel, an Angel of Death, to be precise, just as I am. We have descended from the sky to bring your doom.’ The men wanted to escape now, but they remained frozen on place to realize that the silly rumor of the Tailed Brothers being sent by the gods to destroy this world might actually be a reality. “Unfortunately, I am not to take part of this pleasurable occasion of this cathartic carnage. Zidane deserves all this fun for himself for having been victim of your dumb kidnapping and

ransoming idiocies, actions that had sealed your fate the instant you have laid your dirty hands on him.”

Frozen by horror, the three men could not even find their time to grab their weapons to take on the tailed noble by the fear of meeting their death faster. When tiny, yet heavy steps were heard behind their back, they turned around, only to get their fear amplified beyond nightmares. The sight before them was a glimpse of their dreadful reality.

The tailed child they thought as weak and malleable stood there with two daggers which they recognized as Tapir’s, his tiny hands damped by the blood of his victims. Stained crimson on his attire and parts of his bare skin, he shook the dripping blood off him like a dog shaking water off, launching drips of red all across the room. When the boy stared back at the men, the kidnappers spotted the red juice leaking from his smiling lips and chins. Between his red-stained teeth, a patch of fur and grey skin that seemed to have belonged to Tapir hung down and flopped under the feral boy’s grin.

Like he had madly enjoyed his carnage, Zidane started to giggle and gave the men a cold, maddening glare.

“W-What are you?!” Boss stuttered as he managed to unsheathe a dagger which trembled between his fingers.

With a tired sigh, Kuja said, “I have told you already. Do I really need to repeat myself? Your short-term memory deludes you, but fine, if I have to explain again. Zidane and I, we are Angels of Death sent by a higher authority to bring death upon this world. I suppose this is something I should not tell you, but you still have my written note that I should claim back. After all, how can words and notes matter to a group of dead men?”

It was Ox’s time to take his weapon out. Trying to act the bravest as the tallest and buffest of the men, he came forward but remained careful. “No, that’s a bunch of bullshits!” he screamed.

“It is unfortunate that the death of your two companions is not ‘bullshit’,” the older brother snickered at his own word, clearly not used to say such unrefined terms. “Oh well. It is now my time to enjoy the spectacle my little brother has started in the backroom. I hope the carnage will be worthy of my time. Enjoy your death.”

The massacre began. Zidane spitted out the piece of hanging flesh out of his mouth before he sprang

toward Boss without warning, his daggers quickly slicing through his throat. As Ox ran forward the boy to stop him, the tailed child kicked Boss on the face and bounced toward Ox to cast out the man's knife out of his hand with his daggers. Pushing Ox to the floor by jumping and landing straight at full weight on the man, Zidane immediately bounced again to land on the big Anthropomorph with his two daggers stabbing deep into the flesh of his chest. Ox coughed blood out of his throat, where the intense pain pinned him to the floor.

Zidane had specifically not aimed to this man's vital parts so he could watch that despicable Gaian suffer into a slow and painful death.

After observing the scene, Kuja prided himself to see how Zidane had grown up to become the little brother he wanted him to be; a fearless, violent, yet obedient child.

"***Oh, and hey, don't forget to take a bath in the nearby lake when we return home,***" Kuja mocked the boy in their minds as he caught the written note from the now dead Boss's hand and burned it with a weak Fire spell. "***The stench stemming from your body is worse than from all these men combined.***"

Frozen by the comment, Zidane gave Kuja a saddened glare with a disappointed pout on his lips. He protested, "***Aww, I have to? Can't smell anything on me.***"

Of the five kidnappers, only Human was still standing, his weapon long dropped to the ground from the terror as he continued to shiver in a corner. He should have fled to the entrance door when he had the moment, when Zidane was taking on his two other companions. But after witnessing this bloodied scene, he knew the Tailed Brothers will reach him as fast as Zidane had killed his partners with such ease in a split second. He knew he was going to join them and die soon.

He shut his eyes and waited for his fate to come.

He waited, and waited…

And suddenly, the door shut, and there were no more noises around, save for his own heavy nervous breathing and the fast sounds of his heartbeat.

There was no pain, no death that came to him, and he opened his eyes after a minute of this surrounding silence.

It was a miracle.

The Tailed Brothers were gone, having left their hideout into a mess of blood and lifeless corpses.

They had spared him…

Well, this will be the last time he will deal with these savage nobles…

…

"***Human was nice with me.***"

"***Oh, is that why you left him alive?***"

"***Yes! He feeds me with good food! His friends hurt me all time and give me bad food!***"

That very statement, while innocent sounding, offered Kuja a startling realization out of his growing little brother. At this point of his life, even as a child loyal to his older brother, Zidane still was an easily influenced boy when Kuja was out of the way. How he spoke of that Human he left behind revealed how much kindness and good manners could distract him from the purpose of his life, and this might become a problem as this child will eventually grow into an adult. To reach adulthood meant Zidane will take his own decision about his life, where he might not even follow Kuja anymore.

And for this reason, not only he will have to manipulate the Gaians to reach his goals, but Zidane as well.

The thought pained him.

"***Ha, ha! I see,***" Kuja responded to the boy, trying to keep up with Zidane's enthusiasm of being freed. "***You're learning well of your own, to leave someone alive without my intervention. You're growing up, Zidane.***"

Despite all the fresh blood on Zidane, Kuja had no care to get himself stained as he caught his bouncing brother in his arms and raised him to his level. They had missed the other for long days, and a lasting, warming hug was needed to appease each other. Zidane wrapped his arms around his brother's neck and Kuja patted him on the head before they brushed their noses, chuckling together.

It felt so nice to not be alone anymore.

Author's note*: Okay, I was in the mood for a more violent chapter. Also, I don't imagine Kuja can carry his millions of gil in some random bags to the bad guys, all alone. So, let's just assume there's a*

bank system in the world of Final Fantasy IX where written notes are considered cheques and all. Yes, I made that up.

Chapter 10: Leaders

Guess it's time for something else.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 10: Leaders

The next day had been restless for everyone. When the brothers reached home in Treno, the servants were celebrating Zidane's return. Getting all that attention seemed to raise the boy's awareness that Gaians might be capable of love toward them, but Kuja was quick to remind him this was all but a façade as servants of the Tribal House. Indeed, servants whose task was to make their masters happy. Thankfully for Kuja, the boy believed it to be the truth.

For now.

When they both hit their bedroom together, Zidane bounced on the bed, relieved to find a soft ground where he could slumber in peace and comfort. After giving his mattress a silly hug, he went back to his excited behavior, jumping on the bed and exclaiming, "Hey, we can create group of

many people and make them kill people! We start war!”

That statement came out as a total surprise, so much Kuja hadn’t been paying concern to it at all. When Zidane repeated the exact same words after he noticed Kuja’s lack of reaction, it was only then the older brother realized what the boy was saying.

Of course, Zidane had never been a good tactician or thinker, except when it came for the Tetra Master game. From his eight years of life, it’d been the first time ever Zidane attempted to contribute ideas into Kuja’s plans to conceive a war. Yet, that idea was at most ridiculous to Kuja that he was ready to ignore it and leave the room without a word, but Zidane appeared quite insistent on being heard as he continued to bounce on the bed. Kuja turned around, earning him an exhausted sigh.

The big brother explained, “You cannot simply order random people around to start a war. It does not work that way.”

When the boy stopped bouncing, it was clear Zidane’s excitement was affected. Confused, he blinked at Kuja with a disappointed pout. He asked, “Huh? Why? When you tell me to kill, I kill, so why not people too?”

“Gaians are not like you or I,” Kuja insisted, now speaking slower to make sure Zidane listened. “Look, all Gaians, including monsters, animals and even plants, have a soul like us, unlike the other Genomes. But since Gaians have a soul, each have their own individuality, just like you and I. Because they have their own individuality, most of them will refuse to participate into such war, unless ordered by someone of authority, a leader, a king or a queen.”

“Oh,” the boy said, mouth agape. “What’s a queen? Is like Lady Queen?”

Kuja sighed again. He was afraid this was turning into one of these questions and answers sessions he loathed so much. “No, Zidane,” the young man said, the rising exasperation in his voice now audible. “The Lady Queen we knew was only her nickname among nobles and the folks who knew her fame. She was not a true queen.”

“Oh, then we ask Genomes to start war?”

“We cannot. They might have no individuality, but they are not made to kill. They are made to be vessels, to learn the knowledge of the world to avoid mental decay and to comply and assist with Master Garland’s orders and tasks. They can only obey

literal orders, so ordering them to start a war will be very problematic.”

Another idea lit up in the child’s thoughts. When Kuja saw the sparkles in Zidane’s eyes, he folded his arms with another huff, expecting to waste more time listening to his blabbering. “We can make things like Genomes, but they kill and kill only!”

… Now, this had gotten his interest.

Kuja had never been so glad to have listened to his brother’s fruitful advice, for once. Creating soulless vessels with the only purpose to kill sounded like an interesting concept. If Garland was able to create beings and things for certain tasks, just like the Genomes, the Silver Dragons, the Iifa Tree or even Soulcage, then it was certainly possible for someone like Kuja to achieve something as grand and impactful. All it took were knowledge and skills, which he possessed, but he was going to need deeper researches.

Yet, that idea was only that for now: a concept. To make these actual vessels, Kuja knew what he will have to work on for the next years. He wasn’t going to find anything in the Gaian libraries that might help him. He will have to rely on the Terran books.

Returning together to their hideout on the Outer Continent, Kuja spent the following days researching the books and the holograms in the Desert Palace, hoping to find something that will enlighten him with this concept. Zidane had insisted on help him in a way or another, but Kuja would shove him away, pretending he was only slowing things down. Having nothing else to do in their old home and without Gaians to bother, he'd go play with Mahila or fight the monsters that were roaming in the palace or outside in the desert. Taking on the Sandworms was a dangerous game, but there were so many of them to practice his fighting skill he no longer had any problem eliminating them.

Years before, neither Zidane nor Kuja had fully explored the palace, this area being so wide filled with lighting puzzles to walk around. At some point, Zidane had given up trying to find his ways, so he'd wander to the easier accessible places. He could not remember much of the palace disposition since their moving to their Treno manor, so he decided to explore this grand area again while Kuja busied himself with the books in the library.

When he walked around while humming one of these catchy songs he was taught from one of the Tribal's servants, something caught his attention.

Wandering around the Fire Chamber where he had learned how to light the fires to open the doors, a Moogle sat against the wall, reading one of the Terran books it must have borrowed from the Library. When the furred creature grasped over the boy's presence, it started to panic. "K-Kupo! Oh no! Humans!" it shrieked before it went up to run and hide. Well, from its voice, it clearly was a male Moogle.

Stumped by the Moogle's reaction, Zidane trotted after him, having no problem following but he maintained his distance to see where he was going without being noticed. When the Moogle stopped and turned around, he no longer saw the child behind him. He let out a sigh of relief before crawling under a table, feeling safe there. "Oh no, no, no!" he whispered to himself, all nervous. "This place was such a nice home without humans, kupo! I never thought I'd find them here! What if I'll have to leave this nice home too, kupo?"

Listening to him from his hidden spot, Zidane began to laugh in silence. He had no mind that Moogles came to live in this palace as this place was already too big just for Kuja and himself. If few other sentient creatures had made this hideout their home while they'd been in Treno, he'd just ask them

to stay. As he was about to come closer to the Moogle, the wall behind him began to rumble and then twisted around, swallowing the creature as he yelped in fright and disappeared behind the wall. Shocked but curious, Zidane crouched under the table where the Moogle had been, trying to find what had caused him to vanish behind.

Scrutinizing the wall and the table, he discovered a button under the table and he pressed it.

Taking a step back, he watched as the wall under the table turned again, revealing behind a wide, hidden room and the nervous Moogle ready to breakdown in tears and fear.

Having no time to speak with the Moogle and content to be allowed to explore a new room, he crawled under the table. He reached to the other side which revealed a wide room with these big glass tanks that reminded him of these pods rooms of the little he remembered of Bran Bal. Additionally, there were more laboratory equipment scattered around and another cabinet with tons of books placed in a neat order.

Well, Kuja had been searching for books, so maybe there was one among them that might be of interest. Zidane wasn’t attentional enough to be

considered a good reader, but if reading was required to help his brother in a way, then he will do everything to check on the ones available in this room. He started reading the first one he caught on a nearby table, which was written in the Terran language which both him and Kuja could somehow read instinctively. The title already appealed to him.

Conception of Empty Vessels, Part I.

When he opened the book, few drawings, other complicated scribbles and scientific texts adorned each page, some of them featuring humanoid creatures looking like Humans, and others even bearing the appearance of a Genome with a tail.

Wait, didn't Kuja wish to find a book like this?

"***Hey, Kuja, I find something cool,***" Zidane called his brother with their telepathic link.

"***Ah? What did you find?***" Kuja responded, seeming fatigued.

"***A new room and a book called Conception of Empty Vessels.***"

…

Kuja lost no time to join Zidane in the newly discovered room and he was impressed by its

marvel. He went to grab the book his brother was holding and opened it to see some thorough, gruesome details of the prototype of an empty vessel made to welcome a soul before they were given a proper term, a Genome. Only when they will receive a soul, they will be given a full mortal life, sentience and a free will. Before then, the vessels will acquire knowledge and will do several tasks for their most recent android creation which they put hope on to revive their Terran civilization and planet, a creation they named “Garland”.

How fascinating…

If only he could transfer this concept to another kind of empty vessels to create an army of killers, that would be the most convenient to his goal to prove their master that they could achieve anything, like ruling the worlds and disposing of the old man.

That might work, but he was expecting to spend the next years into this alone as Zidane certainly couldn’t help him with this.

Yet, Zidane had discovered this hidden room full of Terran treasures and this book, which was helping him more than enough…

The day Zidane hit his ninth year of life, a pleasant surprise was held by the servants of the Tribal noble house. The tailed boy woke up to find a nicely decorated and sweet-smelling cake on the dining room, the first place he would always head after getting his morning cleanup. Kuja found the cake at the same time, where the servants were gathered around the table to wish the boy a happy birthday. Both brothers had never seen anything like this before, but Zidane seemed rather joyful of the attention he was suddenly getting, though he could not explain why.

When the servants realized that the concept of birthday was an alien and unknown aspect to the Tailed Brothers, shock befell on them. One of the servants explained they were celebrating their master's ninth "birthday", which still left the two nobles clueless.

"Ninth… birth… day?" Kuja asked.

"Wait, you don't know what a birthday is?" one of the younger servants gasped.

One of the numerous rumors that made up the Tailed Brothers' origins that they came from another world was closer to the truth than ever. Who on Gaia didn't know what a birthday was? "A birthday is

when you celebrate the day you were born each year!" another servant claimed out excitedly.

Right. Kuja could never tell why he remembered clearly the day Zidane was born, or rather, "released" from his tank in the Bran Bal laboratory. Kuja did not recall the exact day himself had been released to the living, but he did remember that he had been on his eighth year of life when Zidane came to be. The day of Zidane's life was the only way he recalled his own age, so he always assumed to have reached a new age whenever Zidane hit his "day of release".

He did mention few times to the servants of the day Zidane was "born", but he never thought that day could have some significance to them as to celebrate the day of a 'birth' each year. How odd, Kuja had heard of the word "birthday" before among folks and their servants, but he had never given it a second thought. It was a word of no importance since it did not help him in his quest to overthrow his old master.

But watching his brother smile wide at all the attention and the nice food he was getting from the servants brought a short joy to Kuja. He never truly realized that despite how dangerous Zidane was to

the Gaians that went against their path, he still was only a child. Children like him treasured that kind of praising attention.

And this was exactly why Kuja's ephemeral joy was cut short. He had to be careful about this. He recalled the kidnapping events where Zidane, without Kuja's influence and presence, was getting softened by a kinder man who he even left alive after he had slaughtered all of the man's companions. Zidane seemed to crave for people's kindness, just as Kuja was the only one who was truly kind to him. A dangerous child like Zidane remained malleable. If the boy softened too much to the Gaians, he might start to like living with them and perhaps even go against Kuja's convictions.

Or worse, getting his soul taken away when Garland will realize this.

And this certainly was a problem.

When the day of the celebration ended, Kuja convoked his servants in private and ordered them to never celebrate the child's birthday again.

But to deprive Zidane of such happiness gave him a knot to the heart.

How time flied. It had been nine years already in their adventure of life together.

And they had not met any leaders of the world yet.

However, thanks to the gossips among the Treno nobles and even the poor folks of the slums, Kuja was taught few intriguing facts. One of the most interesting ones were the rumors running about the Alexandrian royal family being particularly fragile in temper and decisions. With the years living among the Gaians, one detail he learned was that any fragile creatures were potentially malleable like an uncorrupted child.

Upon learning it, Kuja decided they will stay in the city of Alexandria for some while. As they were to set out to explore new places, Zidane seemed rather happy with Kuja's decision to travel. He saw this as a fun gaming adventure where he'll find new treasures to discover (and steal) and new monsters to fight around the city.

As their fame had already reached far beyond Treno, nobles of Alexandria were thrilled to meet the famous Tailed Brothers of the Tribal House. Already in Alexandria, Kuja gained the reputation of perfection in both mannerism and image, while

Zidane achieved the status of the bratty noble, to both siblings' amusement. When Kuja was not keeping an eye on Zidane, the child bounced around, caught everyone's food, broke expensive keepsakes and disappeared in the streets of Alexandria.

It was during these meetings with other nobles where Kuja learned another exciting fact.

The King of Alexandria was a huge player and fan of Tetra Master.

Of course, merely asking the royal family's underlings to meet with the King was out of the question. Something the Genome brothers had learned during their stay on Gaia was that meeting with a world leader was a difficult task. Becoming a noble and making a name among other nobles helped, but it did not guarantee to meet said leaders.

If the King won't meet them, then Kuja will meet him with his most convenient and precious weapon.

How amazing it was to watch so many folks of all ages and from all groups, nobles and poor alike, gathering around these two tailed "Humans" like they were attending a public announcement. They watched and listened to a beautiful silver-haired young man with a tail bragging out loud about the

game of Tetra Master and his champion little brother. Few travelers here and there recognized the young tailed prodigy of Treno, but most of the townsfolks could only scoff giggles and laughs at a young child capable of beating old masters of this game. This idea was at most ridiculous to the mass. How did someone so young and bratty-like acquire so much gaming experiences in such a short period of life?

“Come and try to best this nine-year-old boy in Tetra Master!”, Kuja announced out loud. Most doubtful of the kid’s skill, they questioned whether Zidane was truly a nine-year-old child or rather some young man bearing the appearance of a young child. However, by judging his childish nature, it was difficult to conceive the idea how a young man acted so much like a brat. His innocent eyes, his kiddy grin and his affinity for adventure were everything that made up a normal child.

Some took on the challenge by trying to best him in the friendly card competition, but so far, everyone lost against him. People in Alexandria were not as experienced in Tetra Master as the people in Treno, after all.

The royalty might not take notice of the Tailed Brothers in the crowded gathering on the streets, but Kuja had envisaged this. There were specific individuals he had been aiming from the start even before hitting the city of Alexandria. More exactly, he wanted to reach out to the ones of order who had sworn to protect the citizens, the people who had an easier access to the royal family.

As soon as he spotted one of the soldiers among the curious crowd, Kuja challenged her. “Young Lady Warrior,” he called the soldier who took a sudden interest into Kuja’s attractiveness and his strange, yet endearing tail moving in a slow pace left and right, like a cat. “Are you up for a nice game of cards?”

Taken aback by the mysterious silver-haired young man’s soft and lovely voice, the soldier came closer to him while she couldn’t suppress that shy blush from her cheeks. She was unable to hide her embarrassment or turn her eyes away from him until her partner caught her by the arm. “We’ve no time for games!” the soldier uttered, keeping her voice strict and hoarse.

“B-But…” the shyer soldier stuttered in protest as she was being pulled away from the charming tailed

man, but she still had her eyes darted onto him, never wanting to leave him from her field of vision. “J-Just one game! It takes a minute!”

Her partner huffed a long sigh. “Fine, but make it quick!” she ordered. How odd to keep shouting as if she was taking her duty too seriously.

Excited to get her partner’s approval, the blushing shy soldier came to sit by the improvised table to face the mysterious young man. Giggling with enthusiasm, she took out her deck of cards, eager to start the game against the lovely man. Even as she went for her cards, she couldn’t take her eyes away from him.

Her excitement dropped fast when she realized she wasn’t going to be challenged by the man, but by a bratty-looking blond boy sporting a tail as well. Putting up her most disappointed pout on her face, the realization hit her harder as the boy could very well be the man’s son, making him possibly married or with another partner, and thus not available to anyone. Oh no, that reduced her chances to ever be able to hook up with him… Or maybe there was one chance in a million…

Unless…

Wait a minute. She was a soldier. Being a soldier meant she had some authority over the citizens…!

“Hey, kid,” she began to hush to the small boy who had not budged his eyes at her while he focused on the game. “What do you say? I win this match, and I get to bring this young man on a date?”

The child didn’t reply and he never left his sight away from their deck of cards. To aid him focus further in the game, the strict soldier gave a whack behind the shy soldier’s head, telling her to get it over with fast. The rest of the game carried on without any incident.

Of course, the boy won the game.

Shocked to see that a mere child had won against a grownup, the strict soldier’s pride took another turn for the worse. She tossed her shy partner to sit and try to win a game against the boy. She, too, lost the following five games against him.

Frustrated, the strict soldier ran off, pulling her partner back to their patrol on the Alexandrian streets.

Yet, soon after, other soldiers attempted to take on the tailed boy, curious about that young prodigy. They all lost.

And from then, rumors and words about the mysterious tailed prodigy who could beat anyone in Tetra Master ran among the soldiers of the royal family, which eventually reached ears of their superiors and the servants.

Until the ultimate goal of reaching the leaders of Alexandria came to fruit.

A week after Kuja had set up his plan, the same duo of the shy and strict soldiers from their first day came to the brothers with an official letter signed by the King himself. Written on the letter was a request from the King for their presence in the castle for a friendly match of Tetra Master with the tailed blond boy. They shall be escorted by the two soldiers to the castle to meet with the King.

Finally, the time had come.

As they waited with the strict soldier in the great hall of the castle while the shyer soldier went to summon the King, Kuja admired the interior and the décor and Zidane couldn’t stand still. He wanted to explore this grand palace that seemed even wider than their Desert Palace on the Outer Continent, but Kuja advised to remain quiet with him. Unlike other area, they could not roam freely inside a castle, and

the thought frustrated the child. Why was everything different with royals? He did not understand.

Disappointed, Zidane sat down on the floor besides his brother, poking at Kuja's tail to gain his attention as they waited. Kuja chose to ignore him but he sometimes pushed the boy's hands away using his furred appendage.

The wait was getting too long for the child. He began to look around, trying to find some place where he could run off without being seen. Soon, he spotted someone from a door further away, an older furred man sporting a huge pair of glasses and an odd hat observing the brothers from distance. The boy glared back at him, furrowing his brows when he noticed the old man was not intimidated by his frown and he did not look away. Zidane wondered why the man was staring at them without taking his glance away. This made him rather uncomfortable.

"Kuja, there's a strange old man over there," the child said, and Kuja stared at the direction Zidane was looking at.

Curious, the strict soldier listened and looked toward the same direction, where she spotted the same old man before she smiled at him with a tap on the foot. She saluted him. "Greetings, Doctor Tot!"

the soldier called him and the old man waved back at her.

“Oh, oh, I’ve been found out!” the old man, now known by the name of Doctor Tot, exclaimed as he approached her and the brothers. With a bow, he greeted them back. “Greetings to you all. If it isn’t the lovely soldier Sally and the two famous Tailed Brothers nobles of Treno I’ve been hearing of.”

As the old furred man kept walking toward them, Zidane glared back at him, still uneasy with the unusual interest that stranger had for them. “He’s the king?” Zidane asked Kuja who shrugged off the question.

“You are in the humble presence of Doctor Tot, the greatest scholar of Alexandria and personal tutor of Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII!” the strict soldier announced, her hoarse and booming voice resounding in the hallway. “You are to offer him ultimate respect!”

“What’s a scholar? What’s a tutor?” Zidane questioned again, but Kuja decided it was best to ignore him, at least on the outside.

“***Stop with the questions,***” Kuja told Zidane with his thoughts. “***It’s annoying and it’s bothering the***

soldier. Just look at her.”

Pulling Zidane behind him, Kuja stepped forward to the scholar with a polite bow. “Good day, sir,” the young man greeted back before he rose up. “I am Kuja Tribal of the Tribal noble house of Treno, and this boy is my younger brother, Zidane Tribal. We are pleased to make humble acquaintances with a great personage such as the princess’s personal tutor. I must apologize for my brother’s insolence. He is still young.”

“Oh, this’s all fine,” the scholar said as he continued to examine the brothers, much to Zidane’s dislike. “I’ve heard of your rise among the Treno nobles and your famous nickname as the Tailed Brothers. This has gotten me fascinated about your origins. I am quite please to meet you. If you have some time to spare, may I request you to stay here for few questions? I promise this won’t be too long.”

“No!” Zidane shouted out of instinct, but Kuja held him from saying more.

“I must apologize once again, but we have some errands and a business to attend,” Kuja gave Tot his generic, yet noble reply when he did not feel like staying longer with other nobles.

“Right, you own Treno’s most famous Auction House,” Tot said, surprisingly not disappointed by Kuja’s refusal and he chuckled with another smile. “I understand. Time is precious, after all. I will return to my duties, then.” And thus, the old man left to disappear to another door.

The wait for the King seemed to last for an eternity which Zidane despised. Despite this hallway filled with glamorous objects and so many artistic features, including the giant portrait of a wide woman and a cat on the wall, there was nothing to do for him. Poking at Kuja’s tail had become a borefest and Zidane was having more thoughts of escaping this castle and going on adventures again.

His eyes darted everywhere for the fourth time until they picked something of interest on the second floor above him, from where a strange flow of spiritual power was felt.

A pair of two small men, disguised in odd blue and red attires, bathed in an unusual power emanating from them. Zidane shook his head, trying to think through why he could feel them as one rather than two individuals roaming around. Who were they and what were they doing here? They didn’t look like normal servants or royalty.

“***You don’t look well watching these two clowns,***” Kuja remarked in their connected minds, huffing a chuckle.

Zidane looked away from them and then he stared into nothing in particular, attempting to remain focused on his waiting task while answering his brother. “***Dunno. I feel power from them, but I feel one person from them, not two. It’s strange.***”

This had taken Kuja by surprise. This was the first time he ever heard of such things. “***Two as one?***”

Zidane nodded. That fact will require some researches from Kuja’s part. How could two people actually be one person? This was something beyond their privileged and more advanced knowledge.

Lost in thoughts, Zidane hadn’t really been paying attention to anything until he perceived some loud voices behind his back.

“They have a tail!”

“Right, you are!”

“Since when do humans have tails?”

“Tails, you say?”

“Yes, I said tails!”

“Quite strange, isn’t it?”

Strangely, the soldier with the tailed siblings paid no heed to the voices, but when the brothers turned around, they were faced with the very two subjects of their secret discussion, both little men glaring at them like they were curiosity wonders. Kuja didn’t seem to mind being constantly observed as circus freaks, but Zidane hated that constant attention. When his boredom turned into a frown on his face, the two little men bounced away from the obviously annoyed kid.

“He’s angry!” the blue one exclaimed.

“Angry, he is!” the red one cried after.

“Oh?” Kuja began, not the least concerned by Zidane’s sudden growl at them, which he stopped by pulling his little brother behind him again. “And you are…?”

With the calm Kuja projected over, the two little men appeared more reassured with him. They both approached him. “Oh, I am Zorn!” the blue one introduced himself.

“And Thorn, I am!” the red one followed after him.

“We are twins, if you can’t tell!”

“The royal family jesters, we are!”

No wonder they were acting all odd and funny, Kuja thought to himself. No sane Gaian Humans should act the way they were, at least naturally, unless they were not Humans. If what Zidane had told him was true, then these two jesters might be something else completely.

After few words and more growls from Zidane who had no remorse to manifest his hate for them, the jesters left them in their wait again, much to the brothers’ boredom.

Thankfully, not a minute elapsed after the jesters had left that another presence was heard from afar in the hallway. Everyone turned to the noises to see the shy soldier walking forward them, escorting two new strangers behind.

Obviously, not any kind of strangers.

These two radiated powers. No, not that type of power which Zidane could feel. It was a power that alluded them as parts of the world’s leaders.

A broad man of tall stature stepped in, bathed in a royal crimson attire and a long cape trailing behind, his steps echoing with a majestic tint in the hallway. By his side, an imposing, wide dark-skinned woman adorning red and white decorated with gems walked in, smiling and fanning herself with her fan that looked too small for her allure. As they approached the brothers, the strict soldier greeted them in silence by kneeling and bowing.

Trying to adopt a louder tone, the shy soldier accompanying the leaders announced, “You stand before the rulers of Alexandria, King Alexander Got and Queen Brahne Raza Alexandros XVI!”

While Kuja began to bow before them, Zidane blinked at his brother before he pouted with his arms folded and he frowned. What was the deal with the royals? Why were people acting all submissive and strange with them? They weren’t looking any different from the other Humans Zidane had met before. He rolled his eyes, giving off an exhausted sigh like Kuja would do all the time whenever he’d act like a brat. He was not impressed by the presence of the King and the Queen and he tapped the floor with his foot and even his tail like he was waiting for something amazing to happen.

The strict soldier besides him was going to force the child to bow until the King made a move requesting her to stop. “It’s fine!” King Alexander exclaimed with an amicable laugh. “We need no formalities during a Tetra Master game! It is for this very reason I have summoned these two gracious Treno nobles, right? To each on their own in a battle of wits, where two opponents challenge their talents in a competition, where each are of equal status and maturity!”

Zidane could have sworn he heard Kuja chuckling at the mention of the King’s last word. He had to remind himself to ask Kuja what “maturity” meant later. Probably something funny.

Besides Kuja’s chuckles, Zidane was surprised to see the Queen laughing after the King, where they both suddenly went for a quick kiss. The act of kissing from lovers had always repulsed him and he wondered why married adults would do this all the time. Wincing in disgust, he shuddered with his clenching teeth.

From the way the royal couple kissed and laughed, despite their very diverse appearances, Kuja could tell that both loved each other deeply.

Perhaps something worth noting…

"***I don't like them,***" Zidane told his brother, keeping that pout and folded arms.

"***Too bad, you'll have to bear it,***" Kuja replied, amused by his sibling's disgust. "***You have to be careful with royals. They are of much bigger importance than nobles.***"

"***Why?***" Zidane wanted to argue. He never understood the concept of social status and everything. To him, whether they were Humans, Anthropomorphs, rich, poor, they were all Gaians.

Making himself reassuring when he noticed the boy's reluctance, the King crouched himself to Zidane who was now holding to his older brother's tail like an innocent child. "Don't be afraid," the smiling King cheered on him before he laughed again. "Come with me and we'll play a game of Tetra Master! You like this game, right?"

The King seemed to own some skill to speak soft with children. The tone he used should soothe normal children, but Zidane was hardly in the norm. "Okay," the child responded.

After a short chat, the King and the boy sat around a small table with their deck of cards. While they were playing, Kuja was stuck with the two

soldiers keeping an eye on him with the never-too-far Queen who walked around the young man with a smile, giving him few captivated stares. Unlike Zidane, Kuja had his fair share of being an exhibitionist. He had no mind for others to take a look at his body, especially gaining curious eyes with his current revealing attire which Zidane hated. The boy even called him a girl for it. Funnily, Kuja never took offense from it.

Kuja also knew their tails attracted people's attention, or they would have not earned the reputation of the "Tailed Brothers" for nothing.

"You know, you are the image of perfection," the Queen complimented on his good look, to which Kuja smiled.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Your Majesty," Kuja retorted gently. "Let us observe this card game and see who will come out victorious, shall we?"

They lost no more time for chat and blabbering. Now in full silence, both opponents focused on their cards.

Zidane won.

"Impossible…!" the King whispered under his breath, shocked that he had been defeated by a mere

nine-year-old boy. Broadening his hoarse and blaring voice, he exclaimed, “It must have been luck! A child cannot best me in Tetra Master!”

“Oh, darling,” the Queen hushed to her husband as she wrapped her arms around him, giggling at his loss. “Just admit you’ve been defeated. Didn’t you just say that opponents are of equal maturity in a game?”

“This was just a silly quote!” the man protested.

“A quote you made yourself,” the woman mocked.

Unable to endure this loss, the King ordered another game, which soon turned into a small tournament of nine games in total, to which Zidane won all.

Furious at the losses, the King was ready to shred his cards apart and throw the brothers out of the castle for having ruined his image of Alexandria’s champion until the Queen hugged him once more from behind, appeasing his anger. “Darling,” the woman hummed to him, and the man slowed his breathing. “This Alexandrian champion notion is an image you made yourself, of course. It’s okay, it’s just a game. No lives lost, no one’s hurt, just as it

should be in a friendly competition. In the end, everyone is happy and life is great."

From that day, meeting with the Tribal nobles in the castle was becoming an everyday sight. The King would request their presence for more games. Not all games were won by the child, but the King had to resign himself as the inferior opponent.

For the following months since their first meeting, Kuja spent his spare times speaking with Queen Brahne about everything while Zidane and King Alexander competed into intense, long games of Tetra Master. Yet, even as a great player, Zidane bored himself fast that he would beg Kuja in their linked minds if they could just go home. However, Kuja insisted that his brother kept playing as a part of his greater game of manipulating the royals to do their biddings.

This was during these times of Kuja charming the royals that Zidane met the unexpected.

That day, when the royal couple were being busy discussing of businesses, flamboyance and the kingdom of Alexandria with the elder of the Tailed Brothers, Zidane was allowed to take a stroll to the

castle courtyard alone. When he hanged by one of the garden fountains, he saw a young Human girl.

Or so he thought at a first glance.

Wide bright eyes with a sparking fear rushing through, Zidane's body suddenly shivered with her presence. There was a crazy aura, an oddly familiar power coursing through her that he could feel, a tremendous amount of spiritual power that matched something beyond humanity's reach.

This was the power of something he thought to have long gone extinct, years ago, thanks to their home planet's subpar technology. It was the power of summoning the legendary spiritual protectors of the planet, the Eidolons.

That girl who had finally taken notice of his presence… She possessed the same power of the people Kuja and he had murdered years ago.

Yet, it was so strange. Zidane remembered them to possess a horn on their forehead. This girl could summon, but she lacked that horn. Were there Humans with the power of summoning? Was this a power they could harvest and acquire? Or was Zidane dreaming or imagining things?

Yes, that must be it… He probably was wrong and made wrong assumptions. He shook his head and tried pushing these thoughts aside. He was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong!

The meeting with the girl was, nevertheless, inevitable.

As the girl approached him, Zidane turned away, sitting by the fountain and doing nothing but prancing and splashing his naked legs in the water, feigning into ignoring her presence. It was his way to tell her to get off.

But kids being kids, the little girl still came closer to him, standing behind him with a curious eye. Feeling like she was staring at him like he was an odd beast, the splashing of his legs got wilder like he wished to run away from this awkward situation. The power from her put him in discomfort and he just wanted to forget her. He was about to tell her to go away until she brushed her fingers on his tail to pet it, staggering the boy into diving into the water of the fountain basin, splashing the girl in the accidental process.

Startled by the water all over her, the girl began to yelp while Zidane bounced out of the water, landing beside her while wholly soaked. It didn’t

take long before he shook the water out of him like a wet wild Fang, sending a heavy torrent to the girl who started crying and storming off. Zidane stared at her as she disappeared behind the bushes and the trees, perplexed for a moment before he gave her direction a fast growl. After calming himself, he turned around, eyes back at the fountain.

Who was that girl, anyway? She didn't look older or younger than him.

Only when he was beginning to forget about her that he heard from behind a constant sound like a march of metallic footsteps, which became louder and closer with time. On his lookout, he was about to jump away but it was too late. A heavy hand grabbed him by his tail so fast Zidane found himself suspended in the air. Struggling to get free from his captor, Zidane hissed and snarled at whoever held his furred appendage. When he was able to get a better look at the one holding him from behind, he was faced before a tall young, bulky Human man in a big metallic armor, frowning at him.

A very unhappy knight.

Running behind the armored man, the little girl from earlier was still soaked and crying. This time,

she was accompanied by a young armored Human woman who appeared to be another knight.

“Let me go!” Zidane hissed at the man holding him by the tail as he pranced his four other limbs wild, the hairs of his appendage bristling in fury.

Knowing the knight was nowhere ready to release him, Zidane resigned to his defeat and settled down, limbs hanging down along with his low head and the tip of his tail curved down. The knight pulled him closer, keeping up with the harshness of his face. “You kid!” he shouted at him and his loud voice triggered Zidane’s rage again as he fought to claw him. However, the knight quickly pulled him away from him to avoid the boy’s claws. “How dare you little brat hurt Princess Garnet?!”

Zidane calmed down again. What did the knight just say? “Princess… Garnet?” he muttered to himself, shocked.

“Steiner, calm down. Don’t call him a brat.”

That serene, feminine voice. He took a guess and assumed it came from the young woman who was standing with the sniffling little girl. Despite her youth, she appeared nobler and more mature than the knight. Zidane could feel some spiritual powers

from her, but they were weaker than the little girl's powers and more equal to a decent Gaian mage. Yet, this wasn't what caught Zidane's attention.

Garnet.

Zidane heard that name once before, but he had forgotten the name belonged to the princess! So, that girl was King Alexander and Queen Brahne's daughter! He really made wrong assumptions! The royal parents were as Humans as any other Humans, so this "Garnet" must be Human as much!

"But this kid splashed the princess!" the knight protested, giving the young woman wide objecting eyes, though he still held the tailed child by his tail, much to Zidane's disappointment.

The knight woman chuckled softly. "They are children," she began, all solemn. "I will have a talk with the princess and explain children things with her."

With a humph, the knight man dropped the kid and Zidane landed on the ground with a yelp. Before he was able to stand back, the man cleared his throat before he announced, "You stand before Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII!"

As the child dusted himself on the ground and sat back on his rear, he snarled at the man. “I’m not standing!” he protested before he bounced back on his feet, adopting his defense stance and preparing for the worst in his anger. “***Kuja! Can I kill him?***” Zidane spat out of fury in their connected minds.

“***What? Who is him?***” Kuja asked from afar.

“***Dunno. A big male Human in a rusty and noisy armor.***”

Zidane could hear Kuja laugh from the other side. “***Oh, this must be Captain Adelbert Steiner of the Pluto Knights,***” the older brother revealed, seemingly amused by their meeting. “***Don’t kill him. He’s an important part of the royal family along with General Beatrix. Both are the royal family’s protectors and Princess Garnet’s personal bodyguards. They are also the leaders of their military troops.***”

Wait, so that woman with the little girl who was the princess… Was she the same General Kuja spoke of? No wonder they had chosen her as the army leader. Her powers were still above the average Gaian’s level. “***Oh, okay, fine,***” Zidane answered Kuja in defeat, now having calmed down. “***But I don’t like him and the princess.***”

“***Ah, so you’ve met Princess Garnet already?***” There was a subtle pause before Kuja chuckled. “***Ha, ha! How about you two become friends?***”

Mouth agape, Zidane gasped at Kuja’s joke. “***What? No! I don’t like her!***”

Kuja’s tone in their mind seemed to have quieted as well. “***And she doesn’t like you either.***”

Still in their remote discussion in private, Zidane gave out few grimaces of anger at Kuja’s words, unbeknown to the two knights and the princess who got to observe the kid. The Humans were taken aback by the tailed boy’s reaction to nothing, wondering what was occurring in his mind.

“Beatrix? Steiner? Why does he have a tail?” the princess asked, pointing at him.

“He’s just a scruffy ruffian!” Captain Steiner answered fast, but General Beatrix quickly stood before the man with her fists on her hip.

“Steiner! What kind of answer is that?” the woman scolded the man.

“Yes!” the princess adopted a more excited tone like she was agreeing with the woman. ‘All other scruffy ruffians don’t have a tail!’ she argued with

the Captain. “And that Treno noble with my parents has a tail too, except it’s white-ish! And he’s nice with me and he’s not scruffy and not a ruffian!”

Since that fountain incident, whenever the Tailed Brothers came for a visit with more Tetra Master games, Zidane did everything to avoid the princess and her two most trusted guardians, Captain Steiner, aka Rusty, and General Beatrix, aka Rose. However, for reasons unknown to him, these two always seemed to keep an eye on him.

The next months were going to be arduous on him.

Author’s note*: Zidane finding the kiss between the queen and the king disgusting comes from his childish innocent nature, where kids are disgusted to see couples kissing. It’s not meant to show that he finds them unattractive or something.*

Also, it was about time Garnet enters this story, seeing she’s tagged and all, lol.

Chapter 11: Princess

This chapter required so many edits before the final version, though I still feel that it's rushed. :(

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 11: Princess

Near a year since their first meeting with the royal family and all these games of Tetra Master, Kuja made few worthy notes that might be beneficial for his plan.

A less important detail was the royal family jesters. As Zidane put it, at first the boy didn't know why these annoying twins and decent mages were felt as one soul. Thanks to the privileged access they were given by the Queen to the castle library, a wonder of knowledge treasures, Kuja was able to find out what the twins really were. His brother was right to be confused, because Zorn and Thorn were actually one fearful and strange, rare two-headed creature which the Gaians had named Meltigemini. A Meltigemini's grotesque appearance was made up of nightmare to strike fear into one innocent's soul.

How funny to inspect a drawing made of the ugly monster to realize that their heads did appear much like the two jesters, all without the nightmare appeal. How this one Meltigemini came to become two separate human-like creatures was a question Kuja might never get an answer for, but this secret knowledge might come with use later.

Kuja couldn’t tell if the royal family were aware of having a single monster as two jesters, but they both didn’t seem a threat to them nor to the Genome brothers. They were even easily influenced, which Kuja could use to his advantage… And for this reason, both him and Zidane decided it was better not to disclose the secret fact to anyone else.

A second note was Doctor Tot’s fascination for the brothers on their biological side which was becoming stranger and more annoying with each passing day. From afar or close by, the old man observed them interacting and then he would take notes. He’d ask questions of their human nature and why they were acting like this and that. When Zidane revealed once by accident that they came from the Outer Continent, curiosity sparkled brighter than ever on the scholar. When the man questioned about the Outer Continent which no one had ever visited for centuries, Kuja only offered vague

answers about the continent being dead, which had pushed the brothers to live on the Mist Continent instead.

In the end, the old scholar concluded they were simply Humans hailing from another continent with a strange mutation of a fully motored and functional tail, just like the Burmecians.

A third and more convenient aspect was the origin of King Alexander. As the servants put it simply, the man had not been born a royal, but a noble who came from the realm and city of Lindblum. During his time living as a noble, the man had been a close friend to the former Regent and the current Regent as well, Cid Fabool IX, thanks to their philanthropic nature. His generous side as well as his wish to educate the population to create Gaia a better world for everyone, whether they were poor or rich, had earned him the reputation of the Great Alex back then.

His friendship with the likewise philanthropic Regent of Lindblum and his easygoing attitude had attracted the Queen’s attention, and they had fallen in love with each other. Since their marriage, schools and hospitals had been opened all across Alexandria.

Despite his carefree personality, King Alexander’s mind was hard set to educate everyone equally and to free all from ignorance to make the continent a much better place to live without war and poverty.

This meant manipulating the King will not be an easy task.

However, there came the more interesting part in this aspect in Kuja’s scheme.

Queen Brahne, despite having been born a royal and living as a royal her entire life, had more the demeanor of a follower rather than a leader since the loss of her father, the former King, in a battle of the old war. Her father’s premature death and later her mother’s had affected her leadership in many ways. She had never been good with decisions and she’d rather leave all the important politics to her husband. Still, the people loved her for her kind and joyful nature and they partly credited her for the rise of Alexandria to its current prosperity.

Because of her social nature, she enjoyed having talks with the servants and her infantry, but she’d been very intrigued by the Tailed Brothers as of late. She had no care that they bore a tail. She even bragged about how Zidane, which she had taken the

habit of calling Monkey Boy, and her daughter, Princess Garnet, would make a suitable royal couple because they were both adorable and they were the same age.

Followers like the Queen were the easier pawns in the making which could become very malleable under Kuja's will.

But with the King around her, the Queen could not be manipulated, and manipulating both might be an impossible task right now.

Yet, something was amiss, coming from an unexpected source.

Zidane was never afraid of people, but he did act odd when he hung around the princess. It didn't exactly look like fear, but rather discomfort. Kuja dismissed Zidane's awkward situation as childishness where boys didn't like girls and girls didn't like boys. Or perhaps he was uncomfortable around kids of his age when they had the tendency to reach to each other more openly, and having been after Kuja's back his whole life, the Genome child had never been the social kid.

Because of this, Kuja judged that asking Zidane what was going on to be a waste of time.

No matter, Zidane was at the age where his mind began to develop to the next level, with him starting to keep things for himself. Probably another strange experience or feature that Garland had wanted on his “perfect” Angel of Death…

Not too further away after Zidane’s tenth year of life, when the Tailed Brothers’ presence was now an everyday sight in the castle, Kuja could say with certainty that disposing of the King of Alexandria will make the Queen much more susceptible to anyone’s influence. Without the King, she will be forced into taking decisions in politics. She will have to find a new person to follow, one that she could trust as her personal advisor, one that will lead her to take rational decisions to make her country a much better place.

One that will lead to a great war. Oh, how Garland will be so furious of being so wrong about Kuja’s potential to overcome any limits implemented by his creator!

The older Genome thought of taking care of this grand murder scheme, one of such great importance this will be near impossible to achieve it without

being seen with so many guards to protect the royal family. Even their two most trustworthy guards, Captain Steiner and General Beatrix, had their eyes set over the Tailed Brothers on perpetual basis since they had become a fixture in the castle. Oddly, the Captain of the Pluto Knights had a particular grudge against the Monkey Boy since that fountain incident with the princess.

Yet, having a great talent for stealth, Zidane was able to find the blind spots from all the guards over the long months visiting the castle. He knew when each member of the royal family was without protection, even if these times were quite short. If the boy had been a normal Gaian, he'd probably make an amazing bandit.

So, how will Kuja be able to murder the King?

Among the nobles of Alexandria and the servants and members of the castle, Kuja was known as a renowned, fantastic sorcerer with a potential for devastating magic. However, he lacked the talent for physical aptitude and attacks in general. Killing the King with magic will lead suspicions onto him very fast, which will ruin his plans.

However, he had the perfect weapon for this task, one that could avoid the sight of all kinds of careful

eyes, no matter how many guards were taking a stroll in the castle. Zidane was agile, fast and small. He could wield knives so nicely and cut through his preys and victims so perfectly that they were not able to scream for help or fight back. With so many protectors around, the King's perfect killer was right under his nose. And with so many weapon holders in this castle, let it be guards, knights, soldiers and even cooks, there will be too many potential killers around to make accusations onto one individual.

And besides, no one will suspect an "innocent" child for this great murder.

Tonight, when the grounds were heavily guarded but the higher grounds were ignored, Zidane descended from the sky with their Silver Dragon, hidden by the darkness of the sky. Zidane went straight to the King's private quarters from the open window where the great man loved to retire alone after long political discussions. The man was sounded asleep on his bed, all exposed, alone and completely harmless.

Careful to not spur any noise, Zidane slowly pranced before the sleeping King, his daggers ready to proceed with his biggest murder of all.

One clean motion, no hesitation. No scream, no awakening, and the bed soon bathed with King Alexander's blood.

But the unexpected occurred.

A miscalculation…

King Alexander lived to wake up in the most intense pain to the chest and his throat with wide open cuts, but there was life rushing through his veins like he still needed to cling to this world. The man caught Zidane's tail with his hands, pulling the little child toward him in one fast move before he bit deep into his furred appendage, a last resort so he could leave a trace of his murderer. Without thinking, the boy screamed and left his dagger on the ground in a loud clash before he bit the King all over in return. Their battle was becoming a biting and clawing tournament until the King could no longer fight and his soul left him for good.

Finally, Kuja's plan will go forward. Satisfied, the weak, injured and bloodied child began to smile and chuckle at the prospect of finding freedom from their creator in a near future now.

Still stationed outside, Mahila crawled her head into the window, distressed by the Genome child's

predicament with blood all over him. With a purr, she came to nuzzle the boy with her muzzle, seeking to offer him some comfort by licking to clean her friend of all the blood over him.

Unfortunately, Zidane's previous scream and the sound of his fallen daggers had alerted the guards from the grounds below. The child could hear them rushing to the King's room.

Zidane had no choice but to find a solution in a matter of seconds. Getting on Mahila to escape the murder scene was out of the question. He was still badly injured, his body hurt, he could hardly move and mounting her dragon companion and then fleeing will take too much time. The guards that were getting closer and closer will see him escape on her.

No, he had to improvise this time.

He dropped himself closer by the window, under Mahila's head. He told her to escape with a shoving move, hoping she will understand the message. Unfortunately, watching her Genome companion on the floor confused her and she reached for him again, licking the blood over him to relieve him of his pain.

Before the Silver Dragon could think of anything else, the door to the room clasped open, revealing two young soldiers out of breath and frozen by the bloodied massacre. They discovered the dead King Alexander who seemed to have fallen from his stained crimson bed, with a trail of red following his body. The sight of the corpse was a horrifying spectacle, and then they noticed a dragon by the window and the Monkey Boy under it, apparently injured in a painful agony.

The dragon had its teeth and muzzle full of blood.

Mahila's instincts told her to leave the scene, which she did, much to Zidane's relief.

When the soldiers came closer to the dying boy, Zidane whispered, "The dragon… devoured… the King… I tried… to protect him… but too late…"

News about a killer dragon roaming in Alexandria spread fast. Yet, no one had ever found that dragon that had butchered the King, nor that the folks suspected a child to have committed a horrifying manslaughter, not even the Captain and the General of the Alexandrian infantry. This was not going exactly how Kuja had envisioned thanks

to Zidane's miscalculation of the fatal blow, but everything still went to their advantage.

A national funeral was held in the castle courtyard that was open to all citizens of the kingdom of Alexandria and beyond, an event attended by thousands. Nobles and the poor citizens were standing together like a perfect world in harmony, a dream coveted by King Alexander during his lifetime, where everyone was of equal status. Standing beside the closed coffin stood Captain Steiner and General Beatrix, each with their knights and soldiers forming a line and brandishing their swords up to the sky. In front of the coffin, Queen Brahne and her daughter, Princess Garnet, bawled and cried tears while they held a ring of roses and tulips which they dropped on the coffin. To each of the remaining royal family's side, the royal couple of Lindblum stood, with the Regent Cid Fabool IX showing a particular sorrow facing his old friend's death. A priest chanted few prayers, hoping for the soul of King Alexander Got to rest in peace after death.

Oh, but Kuja knew as much that Alexander's soul was simply lost as a part of the Mist right now. The simple thought of it brought him a weak smile which he tried to hide.

This was a strange funeral, nevertheless. Kuja never expected him and Zidane to get a privileged spot so close to the Queen and the Princess. According to a soldier, the Queen had insisted for the Tailed Brothers to remain close by them since the King had had so much fun finding a worthy opponent in his favorite game ever of Tetra Master. It went without mentioning that the Queen had enjoyed having long, interesting talks with Kuja.

The siblings could perfectly perceive the despair and sadness on the royal family of both countries, which appeared odder on the Queen, considering her usually joyful and kind nature. Perhaps this was the first step of her breakdown, which Kuja intended to manipulate to his advantage later.

But something else than seeing Queen Brahne resigning to her sadness was stranger to him.

Zidane shivered whenever he looked at the Princess. It wasn’t anything like Kuja had seen before on his brother whenever the Princess had been around. This time, the boy was close to choke some sobs and bawls here and there, something the child had rarely exhibited. The last time Kuja had faced such a crying Zidane was years ago, when the boy was realizing that death could be very well

looming over his big brother one day. Kuja's hypothetical death might turn him into a mad person, just like Lady Queen's descent to madness over losing her fiancé.

Why was Zidane crying this time?

Walking together to a corner where no one could hear them, Kuja crouched to his brother's level, stroking his hair and cheeks and trying to reassure him. "What's the matter?" he asked the crying child.

However, Kuja's reassuring move brought even more tears on Zidane. "It's… it's the Princess…" the child sniffled along with his stutters and sobs.

The answer surprised Kuja. "What about her?"

"She… She m-might hurt you…"

This answer brought even more confusion. "What are you talking about?" Kuja asked, trying to figure out what went across Zidane's young mind. How could the child think of such strange thing at this time?

To make everything odder, Zidane decided to convert their discussion to their connected minds. "***Garnet has Eidolons. Maybe she will kill you with them now.***"

…

Astounded, Kuja couldn’t even grasp at any word to express himself before this startling revelation. The word Eidolons had already been lost to his culture for years after they had gotten rid of the Summoners from Madain Sari, four years ago. He realized that four years were not so long, yet it felt like it had been so far in the past. He had long abandoned the idea of meeting with Eidolons since then, but Zidane’s comment brought that nightmare back to the surface, the nightmare to see his little brother slain by these legends.

So then, why were Eidolons still present in this girl? Could Zidane be lying?

Shaking his brother’s shoulders for an answer, Kuja asked, “***Zidane, since when does the Princess have Eidolons?***”

“***I don’t know. She has them since I met her for the first time.***”

“***Why did you never tell me?***”

“***You never asked.***”

Well, Zidane was right about it. Kuja shook his head. “***… Never mind that. How can she have***

Eidolons? She's a Human!"

"***I don't know.***"

"***No, that's impossible…***" Kuja was soon invaded by old ideas that crossed his mind not long after their destruction of Madain Sari, which was the idea of getting these Eidolons for himself. What if… "***Did she truly extract Eidolons from a Summoner? Or is she a Summoner herself?***"

"***I don't know…***"

That old idea… How thrilling just to think of having the ultimate power of summoning legends, ones that will throw his master into the depth of hell, never to resurface and bring pain to him. There must be a way to extract these Eidolons from that girl if she possessed them, and then Garland will get what he deserved! With the Eidolons within his possession, Kuja will need no war to wage and no need to manipulate others. He'll summon them, and then he'll rule the worlds!

With more researches, he'll find a way to get his hands on them, for sure!

How he longed for the day his master will beg to spare him… This will be the day Kuja will win his freedom.

The silver-haired young man was so lost in this prospect of ruling the worlds and his eventual freedom that he was about to forget the other side of this entire revelation. It hit him as soon as he felt his hands soaked of his brother's tears. Brushing his slender fingers over Zidane's cheeks, Kuja approached his face to his, soon with their noses poking each other. This move always appeased the boy, and Kuja was glad this was working again. Some citizens noticed their moves and they were giving them an odd eye for these soothing caresses, but Kuja paid no heed to them.

"***Don't cry,***" Kuja told him with their telepathic minds as he softly wiped the tears away from Zidane's orbits.

"***Why?***" Zidane asked, now calmed, but still crying.

"***Why are you even crying over this? Why do you think the Princess will use her Eidolons on me?***" It worried him that Zidane might be starting to develop that emotion the Gaians called "remorse" for having slaughtered so many in his short lifetime.

What if he felt guilty of the King's death?

Unable to contain his tears, Zidane shook his head and dived into his brother's chest. Surprised but guilty of his sadness, Kuja allowed his coat to absorb his sibling's tears. "***Maybe she will find out we killed her father. She has Eidolons. If she finds out your plan, she will summon that big, big dragon to kill you, like that one that wanted to kill you before…***"

Never mind that big dragon actually went after Zidane, and not Kuja… The boy must have forgotten about that specific detail.

Still, Zidane wasn't crying out of remorse. No, he was crying because he was afraid to see Kuja killed. This was much less worrisome than he had foreseen.

However, there was that pang of guilt that hurt him. It was so heartbreaking how Zidane feared for Kuja's death so much the kid had no care of his own death. It was for this very reason Zidane had tried to fight that big summoned dragon they now knew as Bahamut, even knowing that he could not survive against the legendary protectors of the planet. If Kuja and Mahila had not intervened, Zidane would have long been a lost soul of the Mist, or perhaps worse, as a vanishing soul of the dying Terra.

What an older sibling he was…

“***I won’t die, and you will not either,***” Kuja said, caressing Zidane’s hardened cheeks with his fingers. “***They will never know our plan. Princess Garnet will never use Eidolons on us.***”

“***But… it still can happen! Maybe she’ll know and when she knows why her father died, she’ll want revenge! She still can attack you and kill you!***”

“***It won’t happen. I will not die.***”

Zidane gave Kuja another set of innocent eyes. “***You… You promise me?***”

Kuja sighed. He was getting tired of Zidane’s childish feelings. “***I cannot promise anything.***”

Zidane whimpered now. He shook his head in despair. “***No! You have to promise me you won’t die!***”

Exhausted, the older brother huffed and lowered his head in defeat. He looked at the crying boy, his frown hardened. “***Fine, I promise, then.***”

Well, maybe this will shut him up for a while. Zidane forcing that life and death promise upon him proved that the boy must have forgotten about the same promise Kuja had been forced to make when

Zidane was scared to become mad because of his future death. Each time Kuja promised, it quieted Zidane, and the elder brother was able to find his peace of mind.

This time was no exception, thanks goodness.

From the corner of her eyes, something peculiar caught her vision. When Princess Garnet turned to what grabbed her attention, she witnessed the Tailed Brothers together in a corner, with the odd boy Zidane crying and Kuja reassuring him the best he could.

Was the boy crying for her father? Was this because Zidane had failed to protect him from that evil dragon?

If Zidane was crying so much for her father, then perhaps the tailed boy wasn't so bad, after all.

The sight of a depressed Queen Brahne was an unusual sight among all living and serving beneath the castle and none were willingly approaching her without getting a scold from her. Without the King, she'd been trying to maintain whatever her husband had accomplished for the kingdom, but

unfortunately, she did not share the same will that he used to possess. She was not an adept at political subjects as these were too much for her to bear or understand and she would always leave everything to Alexander.

But as the sole leader of the country now, she had to think of something, and fast, before Alexandria will slowly fall apart from her lack of actions.

At first, she thought of asking her daughter's personal tutor and most trustful scholar, Doctor Tot, to become her new advisor. The man was all knowledge and wisdom, but knowing so much differed from being great with politics. It certainly helped, but this was not enough. For some time, she reconsidered making General Beatrix as her advisor too as Captain Steiner was too anchored to his duty as the royal family's protector and the leader of the Pluto Knights. While Beatrix was said to have more common senses in decisions and with the ordinary folks of Alexandria, she was as entitled as Steiner when it came to following orders from their leaders. Her decisions in politics will be entirely based on the Queen's mood, which might not make her the ideal advisor.

She was no longer sure where to turn to, until one day, something caught her sight.

At first, when she had witnessed the Tailed Brothers cuddling each other after the younger one was crying for reasons beyond her knowledge, she was repulsed by the sight to see two brothers poking their noses like this. This was not what siblings should be doing, and yet, this seemed like a normal move for parents and young children to reassure each other, just to show that they were not alone in their sadness, their grief. She was once told that the Monkey Boy had been raised by his older sibling, and thus they were just as a parent and a child should be, a caring family. Loving, orphaned siblings caring for each other were ones who should care for citizen's wellbeing, to care for the country of Alexandria like her dear Alexander.

No, not just Alexandria, but the whole world, a place where everyone called home, a planet where everyone cared for everyone and where all had no need to endure life, but rather, to experience it with joy.

And then, another day when she took a stroll on the Alexandria's streets with an escort, she witnessed another sight of wonders in the darkest

and poorest area of the city. The soldiers had warned the Queen about that district because of the numerous underground activities going on, but that day, Queen Brahne wanted to see what Alexandria really was through and through. She nearly choked into despair as she saw the people living in these slums, but something else radiated in these dark parts.

In the poorest slum of the city, she saw him, that silver-haired tailed nobleman again, teaching the kids and teens how to efficiently use magic to heal the wounds and infections. The man appeared so gentle and devoted into interacting with these poor children to teach them how to live better. Not long after his teaching session ended, he handed them money over and advised them how to invest it for a better purpose so they didn’t throw the money into waste.

In a way, that young nobleman reminded her of Alexander. Both were humanitarians and both wanted the good of the world.

Kuja Tribal was known as a charmer and a good-speaking young nobleman, a philanthropist that the Treno folks loved and adored. Perhaps the citizens of Alexandria will love him as much as they had

loved their King. Great decisions coming from a grand philanthropist will bring the country to prosperity and marvels to her people. This man was the perfect combination for a perfect advisor.

Thanks to the intermediaries of the Monkey Boy's games with King Alexander, the Queen knew him well enough to be allowed to approach him.

…

Finally, Kuja's plan was going accordingly.

The day Queen Brahne requested Kuja Tribal to become her own personal advisor, the young man hesitated, pretending that a lowly noble of Treno couldn't become an important character to such a prosperous country. To him, he was nowhere near King Alexander's level. Of course, this was all an act. His refusal had such a charming effect on the Queen that she never realized that Kuja was simply manipulating her into liking him for his mannerism. In the end, the young man "surrendered" and he accepted her offer, much to the Queen's delight.

His act was worthy of the most refined actor, which Kuja aspired to, which the Alexandrian infantry and servants realized too late.

Queen Brahne loved Kuja as her new personal advisor and the Tailed Brothers had fallen under her protection.

From now on, they were untouchable, and there was nothing a Captain, a General and especially a Princess could do to stop them.

“Your Majesty, it is advisory that you look into the kingdom of Burmecia.”

“And, pray tell, Kuja, why are you bringing up Burmecia all of a sudden?”

“The Burmecians live on the underground levels of the Mist Continent under the dark shadows of the mountains that surround them, bathed into an eternal torrent of rain. The residual Mist soaring around them, the source of fear and war, has a hardening effect on their minds. They look up to your kingdom, all above the grounds, where the sun brings shine and warmth. They want to claim your light as theirs.”

“They’ve been living there for centuries and they haven’t troubled us since the end of the war!”

“They are known for their love of war, thanks to the Mist surrounding their kingdom. They possess an infantry beyond Alexandria’s imagination. Their soldiers’ insatiable hunger for bloodshed will lead to your kingdom’s fall.”

“Are… Are you certain of this?”

“Zidane and I have travelled the world, even beyond the Mist Continent. Their love for war is far beyond compare from other past corrupted leaders and a threat to the current peaceful leaders. We’ve seen their bloodthirsty reign, we’ve seen them prepare for a world war they plan to spread beyond the continent. The short peace you knew and longed for will become a figment of the past. With your King gone, their need to conquer a weaker Alexandria will amplify. All the works of your dear departed Alexander will be reduced to dust. All the legacy of your husband will disappear. It will be all for naught.”

“Oh, that would be so devastating! Is there anything we can do to prevent this?”

“Your Majesty, surely, a fine, educated lady such as you should know one of the most famous citations from Lord Avon’s play, ‘The Bird and the Cat’, right? You fight fire with fire, simple as that.”

“Oh, ha, ha! Of course, how silly of me! So, I should simply use my army to defend the country? We have the best soldiers on all the Mist Continent, after all!”

“No. You will have to lead the attack yourself, by conquering Burmecia.”

“What?! But why should I conquer this dark, ugly kingdom?”

“Would you rather see these rats start a war on Alexandria without warning? Imagine all the casualties among your people.”

“Oh, you’re so right about this!”

As the Queen and Kuja’s bragging and discussion carried on, sitting in a far corner of the throne room, Zidane rolled his eyes and sighed deeply, hoping for his brother to hear him. Unfortunately, whether Kuja heard him or not had no impact on the fact that the young man was not going to leave the Queen now. For months, whenever his brother and their Queen discussed, they’d go on politics, destruction and conquest ideas for hours, which seemed to excite the woman. However, having to accompany Kuja in this, Zidane found himself bored fast as he’d retreat himself in a corner, waiting for Kuja to end all these

senseless talks about power. Zidane's short attention prompted him to forget fast about what they were speaking of, and politics, royalty and nobility were not his fortes. During these hours, he wished he could go out, explore the world and fight things.

He was feeling left out and all forgotten, and it bored him to tears.

Since Kuja had been named the Queen's personal advisor, Zidane noticed few changes in his environment.

The child usually was not bothered by all the eyes everyone gave him whenever he walked around. He didn't think he had changed much in both character and behavior, at least. Still, with people giving Kuja's colder, distant eyes, Zidane was getting the same treatment as Kuja's little brother, like everyone despised both. Was this because they were different? Was it because they suspect them as the King's killers? He could not tell, but the ambiance in the castle was no longer the same routine. Everyone seemed to fear them. All this was just irritating, and Zidane hated this. He did not understand why this was happening.

Or rather, he didn't want to know why.

At one time, he had heard some soldiers speaking behind Kuja's back. Surrounded by a plethora of anger, he had been so close to hurt them to the blood until Kuja had telepathically told him to let them speak whatever they wished, whether it was of negative nature or not. Their mockeries or praises were none of their concern and it wasn't going to kill them.

Yet, Zidane loved Kuja. He was his big brother, his guardian. Zidane could not bear to hear so many wrong words that were aimed at him.

And then, there was the Queen. She'd been so present around Kuja that Zidane was afraid she was going to steal Kuja away from him. There were times when Kuja shooed him away when he was going to have one of these long, boring grownup talks about finance, royal treasury and politics. How Zidane loathed her!

And on the other side, there were two particular shadows behind his back. That Rusty knight and the Rose general, which Zidane had taken the habit to call, followed his and Kuja's every move. To be spied like this was frustrating as they were limited with their walks in the castle. Zidane was able to

avoid them most of the times, but this didn’t seem fair for Kuja.

After all, they were already monitored by their own master, Zidane knew as much. A single move that might go against Garland’s desire to kill Gaia will get them killed, or worse…

Was this all part of Kuja’s plan to rule the world? To be detested that much?

Yet, Kuja aside, there was one person who seemed to trust him a little more than the others.

Princess Garnet.

The castle was gigantic, so Zidane did not meet the Princess on each trip to Alexandria. However, for reasons unknown to him, whenever they crossed path, she’d give him a shy smile and a polite bow. The boy was all the opposite of politeness, so he’d just wave, stare at her and space out until she was no longer around. For an odd reason, she had been acting like this with him ever since the death of her father. It was to the point he could feel her inner powers had slightly diminished like there was no use in them.

And Zidane wasn’t sure how to feel about this.

Kuja had told him that both were different because they hailed from a different world, and unlike Gaians, they were created rather than born. They were artificially conceived to destroy, to hate. And in return, everyone else, save for their Silver Dragon Mahila who came from Terra too, hated them. This was all the natural ways of things, even if the Gaians were not aware of them being Terrans. Even if they were not exhibiting their hatred, they all hated the brothers for their difference.

But Kuja did not want the Gaians killed, at least not now. Instead, despite the hate, Kuja wanted to rule over them with Zidane helping him to achieve this dream, to prove Master Garland that he was all wrong about deeming Kuja as a failure.

No one liked the Tailed Brothers. All the praises and admiration they were being shoved with were nothing but lies and empty words so the brothers allowed them to live. The nobles feared their powers. The poor folks loved their wealth, not them. The Queen needed Kuja’s advices, not Kuja himself. It was all mutual respect for the benefits of each other, and nothing more.

Zidane believed all this, because Kuja was the only one, aside from Mahila, to love him as a family,

and family meant mutual trust.

But Garnet… She did not hate him. Zidane was a good actor and a great liar when he needed to, but Garnet's smile to him was not a lie, he could tell as much.

Zidane felt conflicted. He didn't know what to do about this, what to feel of her.

Why was Garnet so nice with him?

Thanks to the free access to the Alexandria's castle library, Kuja made another interesting discovery.

The Eidolon Alexander.

How ironic for that Eidolon to bear the same name as the late King Alexander. It was during this discovery of the legendary Eidolon Alexander that Kuja found the confirmation that the Eidolons could be extracted from their Summoners in the form of a gem. These new magical gems could be used by any other creatures who sought their powers, just like Kuja himself. Strange how the name of this country had taken its origin from this Eidolon, but Alexandria's name's origin had long been forgotten

into the Gaians' memories. Thankfully, an ancient Summoner from the era of five hundred years ago had been kind enough to leave a trace of its origin in the very book Kuja was holding.

In fact, around that time ago, a Summoner who lived on the Mist Continent had made an experiment with what should become the most powerful Eidolon of legends, which they had named Alexander. Unfortunately, the summoning session had run wrong and the Eidolon had gone on a murderous rampage. Deeming the Eidolon too dangerous, Alexander had been extracted from its Summoner as a physical gem which they had divided into four fragments. Each part had been given to each of the three great kingdoms of the Mist Continent; Lindblum, Burmecia and Alexandria. The last fragment's location had remained a mystery to this day.

If Kuja could get hands on Alexander, then there no longer was any need to use the Invincible or even start a war. He'd rule over the worlds of Gaia and Terra with it, and he'd get rid of Garland for good.

Kuja knew the Queen owned one of these fragments somewhere, though he didn't know in which form or shape. At least, it was closer to his

reach. He'd only have to find the three other fragments. But to get his hands on the other fragments, he'll have to plan something. He could go and steal each fragment, but doing so was just as easy as getting killed while trying to reach for them. All these stones were heavily guarded by their respective kingdom, their original purpose long forgotten to become national treasures prized by all.

How funny, to cherish stones that had no true purpose to their people other than cultural value.

Just as Zidane had perceived from the Princess, that girl possessed Eidolons within, not extracted ones. She was a true Summoner, yet one without a horn. Strange, she should have been disposed of, four years ago, during her town's destruction, something she didn't seem to remember. It probably was one of those amnesia strikes that sometimes occurred after a traumatic tragedy. Or perhaps there were still Summoners alive scattered on the Mist Continent, and yet, there were no words on them roaming anywhere anymore. How this girl was thriving and finding herself with the Alexandrian royal family remained a mystery to him, but none of that mattered. The only important detail was that there were Eidolons available right under his nose, and he intended to use them.

Unfortunately, according to his further researches, Eidolons could not be extracted from their Summoners until their casters reached their sixteenth birthday. So, remembering birthdays were not as useless as he thought it'd be. According to the Queen, Princess Garnet was a little younger than Zidane by about four months, thus she should reach her sixteenth year of life on January 15th of the year 1800.

Well then, one of Kuja's virtues was patience. Only about six more years of waiting. This will give more time to plot all his other plans, like this war he needed…

Being royalty meant being on constant danger. No wonder they had knights and soldiers everywhere in the castle.

And… What if…?

"***Hey, Zidane,***" Kuja called with their connected minds his brother across his studying table in Kuja's new private quarter in the castle, where Zidane was drawing random animals on the paper. Kuja hadn't really paid attention to whatever the boy drew from his imagination over the years, but he admitted Zidane was a decent artist who was able to grasp on shapes and depth of environment in his arts.

Disappointed by having his drawing session interrupted, Zidane grunted, voice louder, “Why are you calling me in my mind? I’m just sitting here, you know?”

“***These walls in this castle possess ears,***” the older Genome explained. “***I don’t want to take any risk of them listening to us. At least, they will not hear us if we use our telepathic thoughts.***”

“***Fine, fine,***” the young boy replied with a sigh. “***Why are you calling me, then?***”

“***I need you to keep Princess Garnet alive until she reaches her sixteenth year of life.***”

“What?!” Zidane exclaimed out loud before slamming his hands on the desk. Realizing he had been loud, a short silence befell on him as he retreated to his chair with some embarrassment. Converting to telepathy again, he asked, “***Why? Is there a reason for this?***”

Noting the shock on his brother’s face, Kuja chuckled. “***I am going to extract her Eidolons out of her body, but we can only do this when she’ll be sixteen years old. I trust you can do a better job than these slacking Gaians to keep her alive. She is***

of royalty, meaning people constantly want her head.”

The thoughts of meeting Eidolons again had always frightened the child, deep down. That attack from Bahamut years ago still lingered beneath like a fresh image of a recent event. He could never shake off that fear when Kuja was about to lose his life from that threat. Eidolons were the only beings Zidane knew they could not stand against, but at least, their Summoners could be defeated. Knowing that Garnet had these legends herself, if Kuja would have given him the go to kill her, Zidane would have done so before he had even murdered the King.

But right now, did Kuja really want to use these Eidolons for himself at the expense of keeping that Summoner alive?

All Kuja’s planning into creating this war and everything to overthrow their master was starting to take a toll on the boy. Zidane had sometimes wondered if Kuja was simply using him as a tool and that their family love was another part of his plan, and thus all an act. After all, Kuja was aware of Zidane’s fear of Eidolons, especially that one that had nearly killed them, which he knew Garnet could summon.

No, no, Zidane could not cast that doubt over Kuja. When everyone feared and praised Kuja for his beauty, manners and powers, Zidane had been the only one who had met his softer, caring side. All these years growing under Kuja's care must have meant something…

At least, Kuja meant everything to him…

"Hmm, okay, I'll do it," Zidane said, confused but blindly accepting whatever Kuja requested him. The older brother noticed Zidane's obvious displeasure on his face. The child might be a good actor, but he was rather expressive during their private family moments and he would give his feelings away to his brother too easily.

After the weak nod he made to approve Zidane's decision, Kuja did not add any comment. However, without sharing his thoughts, all the elder sibling could think of was being sorry to thrust this task upon the child.

When Kuja had been insisting about keeping an eye on the Princess, Zidane would rather do it from distance without ever being noticed by anyone else. After all, her own personal protectors were always

around, weapons ready, to keep her safe. But Gaians weren't made to last all day. All guardians needed their sleep, and when neither Captain Steiner nor General Beatrix were on their duty to watch over her, the duty befell on other knights and soldiers.

It was during these times without the Captain and the General when Zidane decided it was best to check on the Princess.

Despite Garnet's more open heart to the young tailed brother, Zidane only spoke with her on rare occasions. When they did, their discussions were short, and Zidane would leave fast enough. However, the longest Garnet was able to keep up with him was when they had started to speak of their family. The Princess had told how she loved her mother, never minding her odd, grotesque appearance that many spoke of behind their backs. It was all in the inside a child will see in their parents. That was when Zidane had been the most enthusiast, when he had bragged about Kuja, about how he had raised him without having parents, which in a sense was the truth, and how they had been adopted by the Tribal noble house. Praising Kuja seemed to be the only time Zidane truly became talkative, like the elder brother was all he had in his life.

Truth be told, this broke Garnet's heart over Zidane's lonely life.

At the very least, even after losing her father, Garnet had so many friends and companions to count on. Perhaps they only appreciated her for being the Princess, but she was never alone. She had met Uncle Cid, or rather the regent of Lindblum, at her father's funeral. The man now wrote her letters often, asking how she was going and even telling about her father's past as a nobleman from Lindblum. To her, Uncle Cid was now part of her family despite not being related by blood. She also had Doctor Tot who might only be her teacher, but she had considered him a very caring friend whose priority was the girl's happiness in her small royal shelter.

And while annoying at times, Steiner and especially Beatrix offered her many stories from the outside world that was unknown to her.

She had many people who she could seek comfort and happiness when she needed it.

But without Kuja, Zidane was lost and alone.

And their brotherly love troubled her in some ways. She had never seen siblings hugging each

other that much and so close before. She had seen them when they were alone together, where they'd roll their tails and poke their noses to display affection and to soothe each other, almost as if they were some kind of animals. Zidane seemed particularly affectionate with his brother. Were they really from another world as the rumors suggested? Were humans in their world acting like this too?

These poor brothers…

Still, it was peculiar to see her mother starting to brag about the brothers as if they were part of the castle as royalty. She appreciated Kuja's charming ways so much she once thought her mother was falling in love with him. It didn't help that her mother brought this relation to another level and thought of Zidane as the perfect, suitable partner for Garnet, which wouldn't have sounded so creepy if it wasn't for the Queen's obsessive ways of speaking it.

Of course, Garnet will fight the decision tooth and nail, if it ever came to that.

This was one of these rare nights where the dark sky unveiled the full brightness of the stars above

and when neither Steiner nor Beatrix were behind her back to check on her. The soldier assigned to keep watch on her had fallen asleep on duty, which didn't bother the Princess as much as it should. Without any guardian around, it was time for more privacy where she'll be able to observe the stars alone, with no one looking at her or questioning her every move. Ever since Doctor Tot had told her about the constellations and the celestial images Gaian historians made out with the stars, she'd been dying to trace few pictures in her diary using the stars as her inspiration, to admire the beauty of nature and the peace of the night.

Sitting by the fountain of the garden, she grabbed her diary and her pen, drawing dots and circles using the dark celestial celling as her reference. Using her thumb to calculate the distance between each dot, she gave in all her focus to make sure her sketch represented the sky well. Art was a slow and complicated process, but she couldn't wait to draw all the dots so she will connect them and make her own constellations. How her mother will love this.

But she wasn't used to drawing, and she had even admitted her art pieces weren't very good. Soon, realizing there were too many stars in the sky, it was too hard to focus on the sky and the paper at the

same time. Already resigning to her lack of artistic skills, she put down all her art possessions and she lied down on the fountain border, lazily watching the sky and listening to the gentle chants of insects along with the dancing breeze through her hair.

How peaceful tonight was.

…

How boring tonight was.

Well, at least, this was all Zidane could think about right now. Hidden far above from the ground between the leaves of a tree, his body hung by his tail curled around a large branch, his slight prancing move producing a noise sounding like a squirrel bouncing through the leaves. Bored out of his personal bubble, he tried to check on things around that will distract him from his boredom. But on a tree, unless they were filled with delicious fruits, there was nothing of interest.

"***Kuja, can I go home?***" he asked his brother, using their minds.

There was no response. Kuja was either asleep or ignoring him. Probably the first. Even their telepathic messages couldn't stir him away from slumber, and Kuja had a particularly deep sleep in

these days. It must be the exhaustion from having boring speeches with the Queen and his continuous researches on many things, like the conception of creating empty vessels from the Mist. As if keeping constant watch over a girl was less tiring.

Unfortunately for him, boredom brought drowsiness, and the boy struggled to keep his eyes open. How sleep would be awesome right now.

Well, Zidane had trained himself to keep his sleep safely while using his tail to hang onto things without falling. The nickname of Monkey Boy the castle crew had given him really did fit him, in a way.

Snoozing through his breathing, he let the emptiness take over.

…

“HAA!”

It took a short, booming yelp to bring him back to consciousness, away from the slumber he was cherishing so much. Alarmed, Zidane shook his head, trying to find where the yell came from. He could hear some rumbles and muffled cries from below. Something out of the ordinary was happening under him.

Two men he did not recognize, disguised as Pluto Knights, holding the Princess firmly, covering her mouth and preventing her to escape and cry.

Then he was reminded of his own kidnapping incident, when the men had covered his nose and mouth with a cloth full of sleeping medicine. These two men were going to do the same thing to her.

Kidnapping.

This was it. It was his time to shine now. Excitement rushing and goosebumps crawling up to his skin, a grin took shape on his face.

“Quick! Make her sleep before the others will be alerted!”

“I know! I know! Let me find the cloth!”

“You’re slow! Don’t b—”

The man was cut short when a small shadow lunged at him straight from above, propelling him to the ground in a violent launch and freeing the Princess from his grasp. He was going to cry in intense pain and shock but he was soon muted to perfect silence when the fast shadow slit his throat, shutting him into an eternal sleep before he even realized it. Shivering from the fear of losing himself

to death after the massacre of his companion, the other man took few steps back before he noticed the little shadow looking like a brutal child murderer bouncing back on his feet and staring at him, his wide, mad smile stuck on his face. On the child's hands, two daggers shined, fresh blood stains and drops decorating the blades and reflecting the light of the torches around.

Before the man dwelled into distress and panic, the shadowy child flung at him, impaling him with a dagger to the heart and the other to the neck. The damage was immense but the suffering was minimal as the victim was not even offered enough time to grasp through his imminent death.

How disappointing. The longer suffering from men like them had always left him with a more satisfying experience. Not this time…

Terrified by the scene that had run like a flash, Princess Garnet crawled herself by the fountain, crying and shivering like a young toddler. She wanted to cry for help for having been so close to disappear and for having to witness such a brutal, violent carnage.

But that carnage that had provoked her crying was exactly the help she had needed. The rescue

process did not go like she would have dreamed, but at least, she was alive and unharmed. She couldn’t take her eyes away from the two bloodied corpses that were alive less than a minute ago. When she was able to detract her vision away, her eyes darted onto the one who had rescued her in such a quick scene that she had barely seen any details on how the two men were killed. Yet, she did recognize the boy standing proud from these two kills.

Zidane…

The tailed boy was about to leave the scene as swiftly as he came without a word until Garnet called him. “Zidane…! Wait!”

Startled from hearing his name, the child froze on the spot. The call had thrown the satisfied smile away from his face and returned him to his odd, anti-social persona Garnet was so familiar with. Now, feeling more familiar with the boy, she had no mind that Zidane had just killed two men before her very eyes and saved her in the process, or what he had been doing in the garden at night prior to the massacre. It didn’t matter that she had seen, for the first time, his wild, feral side intensifying in such a short moment, like the joy had spread through him during this bloodshed.

What mattered was that the boy had been present here at the right moment. The timing could not have been better than it was.

“Yes?” Zidane asked, strangely all cool but annoyed from being caught by the girl.

Her trembling lips struggled to get the words right. Speaking was so hard after witnessing such cold killings. How could Zidane not feel anything for these men? He was a child just as she was! “I… I thank… you, f-for saving me… If you… weren’t here…”

His eyes maintained the cold and bare gaze like he was an empty vessel for a short time. He breathed in deeply before he said, “Don’t tell anyone I’ve saved you.”

Garnet blinked at the statement. “Why?” she asked, puzzled.

However, the boy had already turned his back and vanished in the courtyard greenery, leaving the Princess alone with the two corpses. Unable to walk away from the scene, she was soon joined by two soldiers and General Beatrix, both astonished by the bodies and the crying, helpless Princess. After Beatrix ordered the bodies to be disposed, she

crouched to the Princess's level, bowing before her with a worried look on her face.

"Your Highness…" the General hushed to the girl, trying to appease her. "What happened? Who saved you from these bandits?"

Princess Garnet slumped forward into the General's arms, taking the young woman by complete surprise. Beatrix was not allowed to lay a hand on the Princess or any of the royal subjects, but this time, the girl was acting all on instincts, now seeking comfort and warmth from someone. Before she shut her eyes, remembering her savior's latest words, Garnet said, "An angel."

Author's note*: When Zidane killed the king and that no one suspected him, my Ace Attorney skills were tingling and I really, really wanted to make an investigation chapter. Also, the part with the "one clean motion, no hesitation" comment was inspired by my favorite cutscene in Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn.*

The part where Zidane forces Kuja to make a life and death promise is a recurring theme in all my family stories. I always find these things cute.

I didn't originally intend it to be a chapter focused on Princess Garnet, but I thought it'd give a bigger role to Zidane so he isn't just a mindless killer.

Zidane and Garnet's birthdays were taken from the official Ultimania timeline information. Apparently, Zidane's born on September, though it's not mentioned which day.

Chapter 12: Instincts

Oh, character's growth here, I think. Also thanks for reviews!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 12: Instincts

"***She doesn't like you.***"

This had been Kuja's answer whenever Zidane asked about his peculiar relation with Princess Garnet. This was an answer without strength, without an ounce of certainty, one to put the child back to the path of hatred and being hated. Ever since Zidane had saved the girl from the two men who were about to kidnap her, the girl had grown to be fonder of the tailed boy despite his constant cold stance.

Well, at least, that was what he thought until Kuja told him the opposite.

"***But she keeps smiling at me,***" Zidane objected, keeping up with their connected minds, putting up

his most innocent look to power up his words and trying to convince Kuja.

"***This is nothing but her projected image,***" Kuja responded, not concerned by Zidane's innocent look. "***She is the Princess of Alexandria. She has to force a smile upon her people and her subjects. This includes you too. This is all a façade, a lie to appear like she loves her people.***"

Why was Kuja so intent on telling him that everyone hated them? Surely, this could not go like this forever! Even Queen Brahne liked Kuja! Was Kuja telling Zidane nonsenses just to mislead him?

"***What about the Queen? She keeps bragging about you!***" Zidane insisted, thinking he was right.

Of course, Kuja had something up in his sleeve to rebut. "***She likes my ideas, my speech and my appearance, nothing more. She still despises the one I truly am.***"

"***But that's the very reason she likes you!***" Zidane protested, more confused than ever. "***How can you not see it? I don't understand, dammit! Garnet likes me because I saved her!***"

"***She is kind with you because you saved her, that's the only reason. Get her disappointed once,***

and she'll hate you."

How were these words even logical? There were no reasons needed to like someone! Why did Kuja not understand this? "***I still think she likes me,***" the boy affirmed. "***She's the only one who's really nice with me in the castle.***"

"***Are you questioning my logic, Zidane?***"

Kuja knew that had to come. Zidane might only be ten, but he was at the stage of life where he was beginning to become aware on how the atmosphere and his surrounding will affect him. Thus, he had begun to doubt people, even those he should trust. Zidane might have followed Kuja through his entire life with his decision and convictions, but this might be about to change. Kuja had hoped the day would never come, but this was one of the assets Garland must have wanted on his "perfect" Angel of Death so he could defy authority with common senses.

Kuja recognized that Princess Garnet had started to admire Zidane, or rather, appreciate his presence more than ever, to everyone's shock. There used to be a time when she was scared of him, back when she'd request her servants to protect her from him. They'd even avoid eye contacts whenever they crossed path, most of time. However, since the

King’s death, she had been softening to him, but that softening went beyond his expectation since Zidane had saved her from the two bandits.

To this day, no one learned of the “angel’s” identity, the one who had rescued the Princess, except for the Princess herself and Kuja. Yet, there were suspicions on one of the Tailed Brothers already as her subjects noticed her change of stance when she had her eyes set on either of them, but especially Zidane. After all, Princess Garnet’s transparency was near nonexistent, being such an easy person to read. Though no one would believe that a mere ten-year-old child was easily able to take on two grownups, the suspicion befell on the older brother instead, the one looking like a silver-haired “angel”.

Kuja possessed few traits that Zidane lacked, which were knowledge and social skills. If someone should know that one hated or liked another, this was Kuja for sure. Zidane might be a good actor, but he struggled to think through emotional outbursts, unlike Kuja who always appeared unusually calm.

Still, Zidane doubted his brother.

“***Whatever,***” Zidane cut the conversion short like he wanted to end this, which Kuja didn’t refute. “***I’ll***

see this by myself. I don't need you to tell me things to believe or not."

While Garnet seemed to like him more, it didn't make Zidane any happier around her. Speaking with her was tiring, but keeping watch on her was even more exhausting.

For some while, the Genome brothers spent their times traveling from the Outer Continent to Treno, and finally to Alexandria. Then they went back to the Outer Continent like a never-ending cycle of monotony. In the Desert Palace, Kuja was spending time to conceive experimental soulless creatures made to kill using all the available equipment and tools there. Then back in their Treno manor, Kuja watched over their Auction House business to see it run efficiently while continuing with his studies on empty vessels. And in Alexandria, Kuja discussed of his progresses of his researches on these war vessels with the Queen.

Yet, all these times, Zidane remained lonely in a corner like his brother's shadow, either being bored out of his mind in the Desert Palace, wandering anywhere in Treno, and then pestering the servants

and especially the royal jesters in the castle. On few occasions, he hanged around the Princess when he was forced to meet her, either by the Queen's request or by accidental stumbling.

But as time elapsed, meeting with the Princess became scarcer and rarer.

Because whenever they met, Princess Garnet told Zidane that she was busy and that she had to attend to her duties as a royal. Right, let it be a tutoring session with Doctor Tot or being taught random things like manners and etiquettes, which were all unfamiliar to the boy. For him, it was as if she had been trying to avoid him deliberately. But whether his guesses were right or not, Zidane hated the feeling to be rejected by someone who he thought to like him. First, Kuja would shoo him away when he was with the Queen, and now, it was Garnet's turn.

At first, he did not care much of her or what she thought of him, but Zidane realized now that he loved the experience of being liked for what he was. Only Kuja and Mahila were able to provide this warmth to him, and even perhaps that man from that kidnappers group some while ago, but he felt the same warmth of being close when he was with the Princess. Even when Queen Brahne joked on them

being the perfect couple, Zidane hoped this was a reality, or at least, something that might happen in a near or far future. He wished this was not a joke anymore…

No, this could not be. Kuja might be right on this. Princess Garnet must be trying to avoid Zidane because he was a mere strange boy with a tail to her. After all, this was what he and Kuja were to the Gaians. Garnet must not want to be affiliated with these two alien boys with the fear to be rejected by her fellow Gaians. This was something Kuja told him often, and Zidane was starting to believe this again. Because this seemed like the most logical answer to his nonexistent question, Zidane thought this was the truth.

But how long will he think of this as the truth?

…

Years went by. There were barely any changes. Kuja was still intensively researching on how to create his soulless war puppets. Zidane was still holding on to that strange relationship with Garnet who he had the bad habit of calling by her first name, much to everyone’s outrage.

Oddly enough, only the Princess had no mind that the boy called by her name with no formalities.

Over the years, Zidane did a great job avoiding her thanks to being sneaky and with Garnet always pretending to be busy and everything. He had been dodging the guards and soldiers, but keeping up with not being seen and noticed was exhausting. All this avoiding this and that just for the sake of keeping a watch on the Princess from distance and with Kuja being preoccupied with his researches and plans left Zidane a taste of complete loneliness. Even Mahila had been absent often as of late, probably to hunt outside or to seek a mate. She grew more feral as time progressed; she'd disappear for weeks and come back at random days and times, which made their travel to the Outer Continent difficult. However, it was a breeze to tame her back to her old ways, but he was afraid to lose her someday.

Yet, there was this odd sensation that would never go away, no matter how much control he had of himself, no matter how hard he fought to toss these thoughts out. Whenever he'd look at the Princess or think of her, he would blush and sweat. He could not explain why, but this wasn't like she had changed much over the years in appearance and demeanor…

Maybe except her growing chest, her longer dark silky hair, her slender body, even her round, seemingly soft butts…

Wait a minute! Why was he discerning all of these unimportant physical features? He thought only the ones like Kuja could care about such petty things like appearances! Why did he start enjoying to look at her? There was even a growing need for affection. No, not that kind he shared with Kuja or Mahila. It was so different than this… He was so scared to admit that he really, really wanted to feel Garnet's soft skin with his hands. This was so confusing, and it frustrated him.

He dreaded to look so ridiculous by sharing this fear, but he had to ask his brother about it, the know-it-all young man he'd been looking up to since he gained conscience, and probably even beyond. At least, if he was to sound ridiculous by telling his growing fears, Kuja will be the only one to know and mock him for it.

When Zidane finally asked about his fears about Princess Garnet, Kuja grasped the truth of all the conflicts messing his brother's emotions and experiences. Once again, this must be something Garland had had in mind when he had conceived his

perfect Genome. Kuja had read about this phase and he had seen this in sentient Gaians before. Counting his brother's thirteen years now…

Zidane was entering into the next step of life called adolescence. He was becoming a teenager. His growing self had started to flood him with hormones that will propel his body and mind to the next stage to change him into a full-fledged adult over the following few years.

How time flied. Kuja was not certain how to feel about this. The years where he had raised a bratty little kid was becoming a figment of the past, like a distant memory lost in a remote continent beyond their reach. How Kuja could never forget these times when there was only him and Zidane under Garland's reign as the sentient puppets of Terra. Zidane only had Kuja under his care for a long time. Now, he was becoming an adult, an independent, strong-willed young man who might soon become even stronger than Kuja.

And despite his strong will, he remained the shy, yet aggressive kid to the outside world. He lacked the social skills Kuja possessed, and the older Zidane grew, the gloomier he looked.

Kuja hardly let his emotions known and he was too proud of himself to admit that he regretted telling his brother that everyone hated them. Yet, he had to make it so Zidane believed this if they wished to be freed from Garland's grasp. Zidane must stay an enemy to both Garland and the Gaians. They both were aware that the damn old man was monitoring each of their actions as he would communicate with them from times to times. Perhaps the old geezer even knew of Kuja's intention on claiming both worlds as his.

But did Garland know their plans through and through? Garland was aware that Kuja's natural sadistic and vicious endeavor encouraged his desire to overthrown his master, their creator, one of these days. However, did Garland even know how Kuja will achieve this? For now, they both were using granted resources from each other to achieve what they wanted, to bring enough death toll on Gaia for the fusion to happen with whatever plans Kuja was trying to come up with. As long as Kuja reached that goal, Garland did not care how he will do this, whether he will rule over Gaia or not.

Thankfully, Garland couldn't listen to the brothers' discussions in their connected minds when they were communicating in private.

However, Kuja promised himself. When he will be leader of both worlds, he will let Zidane become the full-fledged adult he should be, with no one to follow and especially not his big brother. He will let him choose his own destiny, his own life. Even if he will wish to be more than a friend with the Princess or even change sides, then let him be. This was his life to own.

But for now, Kuja still needed Zidane.

And deep inside, Zidane still needed Kuja.

"***You know, Zidane, because you're becoming an adult, we will be able to discuss of complex, adult things,***" Kuja told him in their minds with a soft laugh, as if sharing his little brother's growth problems.

"***Don't mock me,***" Zidane spat out of anger. Even his voice in their telepathic minds sounded slightly hoarser with his changing vocal cords.

"***And you're going to need to control yourself,***" the older sibling huffed.

That comment put Zidane in shock, having not expected it. Left in turmoil, he asked, ***"What do you mean by that?***"

“***You’ve felt it yourself, right? That tightening, tingling feeling down your pants when you look at her.***”

“What?!” the young teenager cried out loud, unable to keep up with their telepathic words. Zidane knew exactly what Kuja was bragging about, but this had always been a subject that brought him discomfort. After all, this was an adult subject, but Kuja was hardly a normal adult. That pretty boy should be the least concerned one with that kind of growth problems! “Don’t ever tell me how to control myself when you don’t even know what you’re talking about! You can’t control that, dammit!”

A child growing up meant he will someday clash against their guardians’ ideals. This was happening with Zidane, much to Kuja’s fears.

Kuja sighed and decided it was not worth wasting his words on this subject. Perhaps one of these days, his younger brother will understand. After all, adolescence was one stage of life among others.

Or rather, perhaps Kuja will understand Zidane, one day.

“***Guess I’ll just pretend Garnet’s a guy so I don’t feel anything for her,***” Zidane commented

with a tired smile, eyes darted to the ground, now converting to their connected minds. "***Man, I feel so dumb. She's a nice girl and all, and I'm just here in your private quarters in this boring castle, confessing about my emotions for her to you.***"

"***Don't forget, Zidane. She's a Gaian, thus an enemy to us.***"

Caught again with his constant researches, Kuja chose to ignore Zidane's latest comments and reaction when a funny idea ran through. What would Garland think if he saw how his precious Angel of Death was faring, all depressed and in love? Perhaps the old man felt so embarrassed to see his perfection stooping so low in silly teenagers' issues that he'd give himself a slap on his forehead. Perhaps Zidane's problems will give him ideas for his next angel to avoid the same mistakes.

Perhaps worse, this might precisely be what Garland had envisioned for Zidane.

This could not be right, though.

Somehow, Kuja couldn't focus on his work for the rest of the day.

“H-How did you know this?”

“Your Majesty, there is no need to be loud about this. I just know this.”

The year 1798. The time was approaching fast. After months and years of intensive researches, he discovered the right way to extract the Eidolons from their hosts. The extraction process was a simple ceremony which needed two proficient mages, a specific drawn pattern on the ground to gather the magic forces where the host will be placed, and the host themselves who needed to be at least the age of sixteen, or at least close to this age if younger.

Two proficient mages, right.

Of course, Kuja was a renowned magic user. He should have no problem performing the dance required for his ceremony. However, Zidane could barely cast a weak Fire spell, so using that teen boy was out of the question. And even if Zidane was an amazing mage, Kuja doubted his brother would agree to this plan. After all, Zidane despised the Eidolons, not wanting to see them appear ever again, let them be as enemies or even as allies.

He should find another magic user, but who would agree, or even dare to follow with Kuja's plan to extract the Eidolons from the sole heir to Alexandria?

And this had been what he'd been struggling to explain to Queen Brahne.

"Y-Yes… That's right… My daughter, she's a Summoner…" the Queen stuttered of shock like she was out of breath. Still, a curiosity haunted her. "You… You must tell me… Only few here know of her true origins. So… how did you…?"

"I have required some help, actually," Kuja responded, the glint of pride shining the corner of his eyes. "My young brother Zidane seems to be gifted with a strange power with which he can feel the spiritual powers from people. He sensed the great Eidolons from your daughter. We were confused at first, as we were taught the Summoners were supposed to be extinct, but we concluded that she couldn't simply be a simple human. Her Eidolons aren't in the forms of normal, extracted gems. They are naturally hidden within her. That was how we knew she's a true Summoner, and thus not your true daughter. Am I right, Your Majesty?"

Gasping at the latest comment, the Queen appeared shocked and outraged at the same time. “She’s still my dear daughter!” she protested. “Why should I want her Eidolons extracted? It will kill her!”

Kuja’s smile twisted itself into a malicious grin. “Your Majesty, surely, you know how we care of your precious family,” the young man added. “This is where it gets interesting. The extraction process does not kill the Summoner. It merely renders them weaker after the initial extraction without their Eidolons, simple as that. The canary will survive the process, and she will be well enough to remain the heir to the throne. The only difference will be that you will own her Eidolons, and you will be able to use them as you see fit, whenever you need them.”

After giving it more thoughts, the Queen settled down. Shyly, she asked, “You’re certain she’ll survive this?”

“You have my words,” Kuja insisted with a softer smile, the same caring-looking smile the Queen had seen when Kuja had soothed his little brother years ago. This softened her entire stance, now feeling more reassured with this. “This is why I am going to need another mage, one who will be able to perform

the dance for the extraction, thus you will be able to summon these legends yourself. What do you think, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, right!” the Queen expressed out like enthusiasm had returned to her. “I have two proficient magic users, right under our nose! Our two jesters, Zorn and Thorn, are actually great mages who know a lot of spells. They might come as useful resources in this for once! We can even start this extraction ceremony right away!”

“Patience,” the young advisor hushed. “Your daughter might not agree to this, and she needs to be of age for the ceremony to become a success. To be exact, she needs to reach at least sixteen years old.”

“Two more years,” the woman laughed. “I think I can convince her to get her Eidolons extracted, if this is for the good of Alexandria! As a Princess, she will agree with this!”

“Not a word to her, yet. Actually, not a word to anyone else. And speaking of which, I need to discuss about my conception for these war vessels. My researches are bringing me closer to a perfect prototype using the Mist to create them. From it, we will create the greatest army Gaia will ever see in its

history, and Alexandria will be propelled into the ultimate prosperity.”

It had been long years since Princess Garnet had first noticed the rising darkness in her mother, and she suspected the silver-haired noble Kuja to be the cause of her growing madness. As the years progressed, her mother grew more distant as her descent to madness consumed her soul, from where she began bragging about wars to bring prosperity to Alexandria. War was nothing but a distant concept to the young teen girl, having been born in a time of industrial revolution where peace flowed through all the three great kingdoms, where they all shared cultures and resources, all blended into one world.

But even with all the gentle words and care her mother would provide, her speeches were still filled with an unfamiliar emptiness. There was no longer any strength in her words and in the way she would stare at her daughter. Her kindness and softness had been sapped away. All of this had begun with the death of her father, and from then, it went downhill. In spite of her now power-hungry ways, no one wished to take the risk to go against the Queen.

Perhaps with the exception of her own daughter.

The duty to bring back some senses to the Queen was up to her. If Kuja was to be the devil of her mother's consciousness, Garnet had to become the kind angel of her thoughts.

No one ever dared to disturb the Queen in her private quarters, a place that had used to be a sort of sanctuary to the royal family over the generations. Careful to not make any sudden noises when she opened the door, Garnet stepped in the room quietly, giving a cautious look inside her mother's personal bedroom. As expected, like she had been doing every night before going to sleep, the woman, already adorning with her silk night robe, was reading a book.

"Mother," the Princess called, carefully closing the door behind her.

The Queen didn't seem surprised by her daughter's presence. She must have heard the door open, knowing that only Garnet dared to reach for her personally. "Oh, sweetie," Queen Brahne called back, a gentle smile forming over her lips. "What brings you here?"

That sweet, soft and motherly voice she had been so familiar and which she used to cherish… Even if she felt the emptiness in the voice, it still provided the warmth she sought from her. Even so, Garnet wasn't feeling as confident as she'd been a minute ago. "I… We need to talk," she whispered, her words coming out quieter than the louder she'd been aiming for. This came out much worse than expected, but her shy tone didn't seem to bother the Queen.

"Oh, certainly!" the mother exclaimed, giving a chuckle. "Go ahead, sweetie. You know there's no need to hide anything from me. You can tell me anything. Don't be shy."

Anything, right. Garnet wasn't even sure if her mother will actually accept *anything*, even from her own daughter. "M-Mother…" she began again, the stutter having become worse, but she couldn't let them stop her. She had to ask. "A-Are you… truly wanting a war?"

War. The very word seemed to have triggered something in the Queen as the smile that was plastered on her face was now gone. The woman put down the book she'd been reading, but her look was now aiming toward nothing in particular, like she

was lost in thoughts. She didn't respond, but Garnet wanted an answer. The teen girl continued, "There is a… rumor… running among the soldiers… t-that you wish for a war to happen…"

Why was she so afraid to speak with her? She was her mother's daughter! She was a big girl now at fifteen years old! She was about to reach adulthood and she had to act like an adult! Why couldn't she tame that fear from surging out when she was around her own mother? Even if she was the all-powerful Queen of Alexandria, she still was her parent, her dearest friend!

The Queen had not changed her state of mind, but there seemed to be a growing darkness surrounding her. "So, M-Mother… Why do you want a war?"

"I don't want a war."

The short, literal answer shut the Princess. She hadn't expected that answer, but if it was the truth, then… "R-Really?" Garnet uttered, hopeful to find her old and kind mother again.

"However, I fear this will be a necessity for the good of Alexandria."

No… Everything she had hoped for the better just crumbled to naught before her. The Princess

couldn’t stop that single tear from escaping her eye. “But why?!” she cried to her mother.

“My sweet Garnet, you don’t have to worry about this war,” the woman told her and she softly brushed her hand over that tear streaming down her daughter’s cheek. “You won’t have anything to do in this. This war will be mine to take care of.”

“B-But I’m not worried about myself!” the Princess exclaimed in protest as she quickly shook her head, tossing her mother’s hand in the process and startling her. “I’m worried about the people of Alexandria and everyone else! I’m worried about you! Mother, you’ve changed!”

This was it. She finally said it, the thing that will either bring back the harmony between mother and daughter or grow that imaginary distance between them, bringing more conflicts in the family. It was now too late to go back. Garnet will have to bear whatever will come after that.

She was ready.

…

Nothing came out. No impulse, no fury. The Queen was as quiet as a lamb. Whimpering from the lack of response, Garnet lowered her voice.

Struggling to speak with her brows furrowing with anger, she inquired, “It’s the Treno noble, am I right? The tailed silver-haired man.”

“Get out.”

Stumped by the order, Garnet blinked. “W-What?”

“I said, get out.”

Unable to bear the madness of her mother in private anymore, the Princess bawled her last tears before reaching for the door and running away, never adding another word to this ordeal.

To her, it was the end of Alexandria and her mother. All because of these Tailed Brothers…

From his hidden spot, Zidane had been listening to everything.

Neither he could say or think of anything to appease the Princess he loved.

He didn’t know why, but his heart formed a guilty knot.

***Author's note**: Short chapter, I know. Also, about the whole Eidolon extraction process description, the way to do it in this fic is probably slightly different from the canon in-game way, but I guess it's different just for plot purpose, lol.*

Chapter 13: Vanity

This chapter was hard to write. Also thanks to the Anon for the comment!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 13: Vanity

"***According to this book, there is an extraction circle drawn by the Terrans in the extinct volcano of Mount Gulug.***"

"***Oh? And where's that volcano?***"

"***On the Lost Continent. It's actually close to the portal to Terra. We might have to study the circle patterns so we can reproduce the same pattern in Alexandria for the extraction. I need your artistic skills so you can draw it on paper and take the measurements of the shapes. I believe you can do this.***"

Whenever Kuja spoke of the Eidolons extraction, Zidane fell into silence. The subject brought that old fear of seeing his brother vanished by a single legendary spirit, one created by the planet to protect

itself. Eidolons were invincible creatures that no mortals such as him or anyone else could defeat.

As a fifteen-year-old, he could no longer remember much of his early childhood and even less his time on Terra or the appearance of their old master Garland. Yet, the image of Bahamut attacking them had been engraved into his mind like a clear hologram. He knew that Garnet could summon Bahamut, and he was fully aware that Kuja coveted the very same power that had wanted to see them dead, once upon a time. Such prospect discouraged him and he wanted to object to the idea so badly…

But Kuja was the brain of the brothers, so he must know what he was doing… right?

Kuja recognized Zidane still feared the Eidolons, but he was confident the teenager will be able to surpass that fear, as long as Kuja could tame these legends.

But there was another reason why Zidane hated discussing or hearing of the extraction process, a day that should come soon. For years, Zidane had that constant crush on the Princess, and the least he wished for the girl he loved was to get her hurt, especially by his own brother. He had been told the

ceremony will not kill her, but Zidane had experienced emotions enough to realize this ceremony might leave her forever scarred from within, knowing that a part of her self was taken away.

And for this, Zidane decided that respecting her by keeping his distance between her, whether it was of physical or imaginary nature, was the best for her.

Yet, Kuja had never stopped telling him to cut that care about her, and that it was only his hormones kicking in his body that caused him to love her that much. Zidane had never truly cared about any Gaians until that kidnapping incident where one of the men had taken genuine care of him. Kuja had thought this was a temporary phase until the meeting with Princess Garnet which had triggered more emotions in his brother. All this had been so hurtful for Zidane, with that constant clash in his mind about what was good and what was wrong.

Still, Kuja was his big brother. He was his sole family, and family had to follow each other, right?

Since the moments he remembered to exist, Zidane had followed Kuja into his plans, as far-fetched as they might have been, thinking it was the

right thing to do. Kuja had raised him from the beginning, so it was the logical conclusion to consider him as the wise, right guy. But had Kuja ever followed with Zidane's ideas?

In the latest years, there'd been few moments when Zidane doubted about Kuja's care in their relationship as siblings. He had questioned whether he had been created by Garland to become Kuja's own pet that will serve him to achieve his goals or just to become a sort of company to him so Kuja wasn't alone in their fate as Garland's servants. Either way, Zidane was starting to hate all this, to be a mere pawn in this game of chess.

If that was so, then why had Garland conceived him with a soul and a unique individuality? He wanted to be a free man just as Kuja desired freedom.

Zidane had accepted to come to the Lost Continent with Kuja.

Soaring above the ocean with their Silver Dragon Mahila, the brothers scrutinized the horizon, waiting for the instant they will see the land of the continent they had yet to visit in their lifetime. They had been

flying over the water for long hours, and drowsiness was starting to reach the younger brother already. Slumping his back against his older brother, Zidane laid his head over Kuja's chest like a lazy boy, eager to use him as a pillow and mattress. When Kuja gently covered him with his arms into a hug, Zidane lulled himself to sleep, ready to spend the next hour into dreamland.

And when he woke up, he found himself in a rather strange, unfamiliar place.

His body was lying on the hard, cold floor, where he felt the rumbles of steaming engines and moving pipes under him. The constant purr of the wooden ground gave him a slight headache which caused him to moan with exhaustion. After getting on his feet, he discovered he was soaring in the sky above the clouds, propelled onto some kind of airship. When he walked to the deck of the ship's limits, he gasped.

There was no Mist under the airship.

How was this possible? Apart from the Invincible which he did not even remember except from Kuja's own mentions of it, this was the first time he'd seen an airship flying without the Mist. If this truly was a wonder from the Gaians, then…

After giving this airship deck a little exploration, what he sought for stood before him.

Kuja was in the command of the airship, his hands gripping to the wheel while he hummed a song.

“K-Kuja?” Zidane called him, astounded by the whole waking-up-in-this-strange-airship-with-Kuja-piloting-it. “What’s happening? Why are we on an airship?”

It took some times before Kuja was stirred away from his piloting task. He turned to see his little brother, his smile static but his song stopped as he exclaimed, “Oh, Zidane, you’ve awakened now. I found this airship flying around on our way to the Lost Continent, and I stole it. Isn’t this ship magnificent?”

Frozen on spot, Zidane blinked at him, more confused than ever. How was stealing a ship spoken so casually? After a moment of thoughts, he chuckled. “And there I thought I was the thief of our duo,” the teen uttered. “How the heck did you manage to steal a ship by yourself?”

Kuja clarified, “Actually, I have been wrong to use the term of ‘stealing’. It was more taken by brute

force. I covet what I see and desire, that is all."

Scratching his head, Zidane commented, "Oh, I see. But how can this airship fly without the Mist? I didn't know Gaian technology was advanced enough to create this type of ships."

The older sibling's lips twisted into a mad, yet soft grin. "You know the Regent of Lindblum? Well, you know his subpar engineering skills and his superior knowledge with engines and tools. This great airship is his latest creation, the Hilda Garde I, the first Gaian airship that does not use the Mist as a fuel, a revolutionary transport mode that will lead humanity to grandiose exploration beyond their continent."

"Wow," the blond exclaimed. "So, the regent was in here? Where is he? Did you kill him?"

Returning his eyes to stare to the front where they were heading, Kuja giggled. "Calm down. I haven't killed anyone, and even less the regent. However, only one person was aboard, and I'm keeping her alive."

"Oh? And who's that person?"

"Lady Hildagarde Fabool."

“W-What?!” Zidane shouted, the name shocking him. “Doesn’t she have subjects all around? I mean, she’s royalty! What was she doing alone so far from the Mist Continent? How did she even pilot this alone?”

“I can’t say,” the young man laughed. “All the answers to your curious questions might be answered when she will awaken from slumber. I have put her to sleep before she could defend herself and I put her to rest on a bed in the guest room in the airship lower deck. How easy it has been to capture this ship, and just imagine the possibilities of convenience! It flies faster than Mahila and while we cannot show off this airship to roam around the inhabited lands of the Mist Continent, we can, nevertheless, use it to bring supplies from our desert home on the Outer Continent more easily, since it can fly without the Mist.”

“Huh? Why can’t we fly it over inhabited lands?”

“It’s a stolen ship. They’ll take it away from us.”

Right…

Curious to meet the woman, Zidane left his brother and visited every corners of this unfamiliar airship. Eventually, he reached to a room with some

bedroom furniture and beds with a sole woman draped in a wide, fancy robe, slumbering on one of the beds. Careful to not make any noises, the teen boy approached and gave her some tiny pokes on her face, but it appeared that the sleeping spell Kuja had casted on her was deeper than he had imagined.

Well, the questions to her will have to come later.

"***Why are you keeping her alive?***" Zidane asked Kuja with their connected minds.

Kuja replied, "***She might be of use. She's a strong-minded person, so there's no way I can corrupt her heart or convince her of a war or anything of the sort. However, one is more useful alive than dead, right? We'll find a place where we can keep an eye on her.***" After a short pause, he added, "***Oh, and just like you, I am curious on her whereabouts so far outside the Mist Continent. Where was she heading before her capture? We shall know soon enough.***"

The rest of their trip went as Kuja envisaged. They arrived at Esto Gaza, a splendid grand religious temple of appealing architecture on a land of ice and snow. Its few permanent inhabitants worshipped the glowing island further away from the temple which Kuja recognized as the

Shimmering Island, though these religious Gaians called it the Path of Souls. How funny, considering Kuja and Zidane used to go through that path of light with the Invincible years ago during their earlier observation on Gaians.

But they weren't here for sightseeing. After walking through the temple to find their way to Mount Gulug's entrance, they were faced by a rather inconvenient obstacle.

A magic sealed door.

"How do you suppose we open this door?" Zidane complained to his brother, folding his arms and tapping his foot and tail on the ground, waiting for an answer.

Annoyed by Zidane's reaction, Kuja frowned at him. "I'll have to think of something," the elder sibling commented, stroking his chin. "I will have to make more researches, but by the look of the magic seal, it appears to be made of Terran magic technology. We will probably find something back in our desert home."

After they returned to the airship empty-handed, Zidane decided to stay in the guest room with the sleeping woman, counting the minutes and soon the

hours until the time she will gain consciousness, leaving Kuja the piloting task. The hours were beginning to be dull and tedious on him, and even the books available to read in the room bored him. Having nothing else to do, he fell into slumber on one of the beds.

Kuja awakened him hours later.

“Wake up, we’ve arrived home in the desert,” Kuja told the sleepy teenager, shaking him slightly.

“W-What? Already?” Zidane mumbled with a heavy tongue and tired lips, bothered by the forced awakening. He was about to ignore Kuja’s efforts to wake him until it snapped that he had not been home or sleeping on the back of their dragon steed earlier. Eyes blinking and wide open now after the rude awakening, the teenager arose fast, pushing his brother out of the way. He turned around to find the Lindblum regent’s wife still lying on her bed.

“Yes, this airship is an engineering marvel,” the young silver-haired man bragged. “It certainly doesn’t surpass the Invincible in both speed and technological advancement, but for a Gaian device, the Hilda Garde I is ahead of its time. It will make everything more convenient. Traveling with Mahila has been more troublesome recently, with her

roaming around and not always available, not to mention being much slower.”

“I guess,” Zidane responded, not adding anything new to this discussion and lost in thoughts from his rude waking.

…

The following hours were spent with Kuja studying books about the Eidolons extractions and trying to find the way to undo the magic seal of Mount Gulug. Zidane was given the task to check on the sleeping Hilda in the airship cabin. As Kuja let him know, better be careful to not let her escape while they were not looking. Always getting these boring tasks! The boy was starting to get used to these long days without action. Bored, he brought some papers and few pens so he could get himself to draw something while having Hilda close to him.

Just when his inspiration to draw hit him, he heard the sound of moans. He rose his sight to see the young woman rising from dreamland.

“Finally, you’re awake,” Zidane said to the regent’s wife, sighing of exhaustion.

The teen’s voice stirred some shock from the woman. She sat on her bed and rubbed her eyes,

turning to the voice's direction. The presence of the tailed teenager alarmed her. "W-Who are you?" Hilda asked with her brows narrowing in distress.

Zidane didn't respond to the question, but as the woman focused her vision, her heart sank. Eyes growing wide, she stuttered, "Y-You… You are… t-that boy I've seen… during K-King Alexander's funeral…"

Once again, the blond boy did not give any response or confirm her comment. His cold, turquoise stare, along with his strange silence, froze the woman to her place. Not daring to add any more words to him, Hilda lowered her head and shut her eyelids, now reminded of the events earlier before she had lost consciousness.

She had been flying with the airship far from her home, the airship she stole from her cheating husband… before that clash with a tailed silver-haired man on a scary silver dragon… And that was all she remembered.

That was right…!

That tailed silver-haired young man… was also with the tailed blond boy, five years ago, at the King's funeral…

Before the amplifying silence between the two grew too awkward, that silver-haired man she remembered from her previous clash opened the door. The vicious, yet soft smile on his face might imply the malicious intents on her. Yet, somehow, within the depth of her instincts, Hilda knew she was no longer in danger with his presence, like the man was going to save her from the dark boy.

“Good afternoon, Hildagarde Fabool,” Kuja greeted the woman with a polite bow, gently casting his brother to the side, which Zidane complied.

“You… You boarded my airship without my consent!” Hilda protested, now frowning at him.

Hilda’s remark triggered a wicked laugh from the young man. “Ha, ha! Your airship, Milady? How can you claim this ship as yours? It certainly bears your name, but my assumptions are telling me that you did not conceive this airship by yourself nor that this truly is yours. Fear not. We are simply going to borrow this airship and we will not claim your life. However…” Kuja coughed and smiled wider. “… we will be keeping you in this cage with care and food, like a beautiful canary.”

Shaking through the man’s comment, the woman stuttered, “Y-You can’t do this… Kuja Tribal!” Now

the name of the Treno noble and the Alexandrian Queen's advisor came back to her.

"So… You know my name," the young man said, all still. "Well, it seems your release to freedom will have to wait a little longer from now on."

As if the prospect of her life grew darker and more sinister, the world she used to know faded from her.

It opened its eyes.

Finally. After years of deep researches and intensive experiments, Kuja's first responsive war vessel prototype breathed to its full life. When all the other prototypes before had failed to grip to the living, this one was the first to reach its first minute of life without falling back to death.

The shape of its body structure and its costume made it appear like a dark, child mage born with magical powers. Being a byproduct of the Mist, it should gain enormous potential for black magic just like Kuja's. Because of its overall appearance, the young man gave this vessel and his eventual next creations the name of "Black Mages".

Over its plain, dark face, its glowing yellow eyes shined and blinked with curiosity, eager to find life and explore its new world.

Just like when an infant Zidane came to be.

Moved by pure bliss, Kuja began to laugh like a mad genius, like he could experience full satisfaction over his cathartic success at creating life, like a god and a mastermind of a wicked plan.

Was this how Garland must have felt when he had created his Angels of Death?

As the little Black Mage took its first steps, Zidane followed it and noted its unwieldy movements. It walked like a toddler standing on its two legs for the first time. Frustrated and impatient over its clumsiness and the fact this war vessel couldn’t walk well on its own initially, the teenager grunted at it and put it back on its two legs before it dropped on its rear again. The young blond boy uttered few profanities like these bad words will encourage the Black Mage to walk with success faster.

Kuja had been observing the two interacting and a sudden storm of nostalgia hit him. The past image of a barely created Zidane trying to make his first

awkward steps on his feet waved through as he watched the teen trying to force the small Black Mage to stand on its own feet. However, Kuja trusted that his first successful prototype will be able to walk within its first hours of life, unlike Zidane who had taken weeks to achieve standing on all four.

As they left the fields of Dali, where the Queen had funded their war vessel factory, the small Black Mage held onto a pole in the Alexandrian cargo ship, still trying to stand on its feet. As usual, Kuja gave Zidane the task to keep an eye over it, in case it wanted to escape or to fall down to its dead by jumping over the airship. Uninterested by his task, the teenager decided to poke the prototype at random place, not sure if it will react to the touches. To his shock, it countered by shrieking and by casting a weak Fire spell at him out of defense and instincts. Having not expected the magic attack, Zidane soon found himself with a burning tail and he started running around in panic, trying to find water. This brought some amusement to the older sibling.

The Queen will surely be very pleased to see the fruit of their years of efforts. If she will give him the go, a mass production of these Black Mages will be factored.

When they arrived to the Alexandrian castle, only the Queen was allowed to board the cargo ship to see the product of Kuja's years of researches. Just as the man envisioned, Queen Brahne was more than impressed. She was in amazement, and she desired an army of them ready for the dawn of the next year and century. However, there was one feature that the woman wished for her Black Mages, and she hoped to see the next batch bigger and wider to make them appear more threatening. A Black Mage with the appearance of a child might not strike enough fear to its opponents. Only when Kuja will do the modification, she will accept to continue to fund the rest of the production. With few tweaks in their genetic setup, Kuja will easily make them just as the Queen wished.

To add, Kuja explained his discovery of the most powerful Eidolon known to the Gaian legends, one called Alexander, a name offering thrilling chills to the Queen as it coincided with her late husband's name. Should the Eidolon Alexander be in her possession and with her Black Mages puppets, no one will be able to defeat the Queen in this war she hoped to see soon.

But to get their hands on Alexander, they will have to claim the four fragments to form one

magical gem that will allow any bearer to summon it. One of the fragments was already on the Alexandrian grounds in the form of the Silver Pendant worn by Princess Garnet herself. One was treasured by the Lindblum royal family as the Falcon Claw and another one, the Desert Star, was lost somewhere in the kingdom of Burmecia, which was rumored to have been stolen by the inhabitants of the giant, magical tree of Cleyra. This was one more reason to attack the country of these rat people. As for the last fragment, no one was sure where to find it, but as the Queen wished to get hold of them all, an undefeatable army of Black Mage will certainly be capable of getting these gems, at the very least.

Because of few errands, the Tailed Brothers were given no time to bring the prototype back to the factory in Dali. The Queen ordered her two jesters, Zorn and Thorn, the only two other individuals allowed to know about the Black Mages for now, to foresee the cargo ship as they will lead the Black Mage to the factory safely, with Kuja and Zidane planning to return to the small village later.

Yet, when the brothers came back to Dali, they found the jester twins empty-handed, with the prototype lost.

Unsheathing his daggers at them, Zidane lost no time to threaten them with his blades. He lashed at them and stopped his daggers a centimeter before the jesters' throats. Terrified, the twins yelped for help. "Explain what happened to the Black Mage," the teen boy growled at them. Very straightforward to the request like he had uttered a life and death order.

"It… It was an accident!" Zorn stuttered out as he backed away from the daggers.

"A-An accident, i-it was!" Thorn carried on with the same distressed tone.

"T-There was a p-problem with the c-cargo ship engine!"

"B-Beginning to rumble, t-the cargo ship was!"

"And that was when… when the Black Mage jumped out!"

"A-And falling to its demise, the B-Black Mage was!"

More infuriated by their answers, Zidane was about to push them to the wall with his daggers, ready to crush them until Kuja stepped in their conflict. "Zidane, that's enough!" the elder brother

called out, using his more rigid tone to calm the boy. With a humph, the furious teenager backed away, leaving some space for Kuja to approach the twins, but his manic stare was not parting from the shivering jesters. Retaining his placidity, Kuja walked to the twin brothers, raising a hand to let them know they needed to straighten up with his presence. Knowing they will be safer with the older tailed sibling, Zorn and Thorn sighed in relief.

“There is no need to quarrel over this,” Kuja revealed, and there was even an odd smile forming over his lips. “The prototype is lost, but I have my blueprint plans all written with me. It has already proven to the Queen its potential. The loss of this tiny prototype is meaningless to me and the Black Mages production will still take place.”

And thus, as Alexandria’s biggest secret at the time, the production of the soulless war vessels had begun.

Hilda had already stopped counting the time spent in this locked cabin in the airship.

Thankfully, distractions and conveniences weren’t missing from this room. Her husband Cid

had planned everything when conceiving this airship to allow some level of entertainment to its passengers. Hundreds of books of all kinds were well placed in a grand bookcase. There was a small, airtight machine fueled by the movement of the engines of the ship where food could be stored for days in the cold. And lastly, there even was a bathroom using the gathered water from the rain torrents with which she was allowed to take showers. As this cabin was also made with Hilda's needs in mind, there were several sets of her own clothes in the drawers ready to be worn. Cid must have thought of her all this time when creating this ship.

And because of a now meaningless affair with another woman, Hilda had turned him into an Oglop and escaped on his airship alone.

She wasn't sure what to think of her situation anymore. At first, she had planned to escape with the airship to head toward the religious temple of Esto Gaza on the Lost Continent, a place known only to few folks among the people living on the Mist Continent. She had hoped to find enough salvation to eventually forgive the regent and then turn him back into a normal human. Obviously, her plan had backfired when Kuja had found himself in

her path. She was a decent mage with enough spiritual powers to turn her husband into a nasty little bug, but she had been nowhere close to fight off that Treno's noble immense powers.

Because of her reckless ways, she was now being prisoner in Cid's own airship.

How ironic, to turn Cid into an insect and steal his airship, only to be detained inside it. Was this how karma worked?

Somehow, even though she still had a hard time thinking of ever forgiving Cid for his cheating ways, she wondered how he was faring as an oglop right now. It had been her own way to punish him for what he had done behind her back, but was it worth to potentially sacrifice an entire country by disposing of its leader? Sure, they might find another worthy leader to replace him, but Cid himself, as well as his father, had led Lindblum and even the rest of the continent to a lasting peace. On a political and philanthropist view, Cid wasn't a bad guy…

Right, but in the spur of the moment, jealousy had consumed her heart…

Well, what was done was done. Cid was an oglop now. She was stuck in this cabin, she didn't know where she was on Gaia and she wasn't even sure if she will ever make it out of here alive.

Just as she was about to drift into deeper thoughts of Cid, the airship started to rumble. So, they were taking off to somewhere, and from the windows, she could see a new continent as well as few mountains in the horizon which she couldn't recognize. She gasped by how fast the airship was traveling, and she had to recognize her husband's talent for creating such an engineering marvel.

It'd been few days she had been away, and she felt like she had not seen him for years.

The click of the cabin door pulled her away from her reveries. She turned around to find her captor, Kuja Tribal, with a plate of warm food and a glass of water which he deposited on a nearby dresser. "Good morning, Milady. You are looking radiant as ever," he greeted her with a warm smile. The way he exhibited such smile sickened her more than if he'd remain cold and evil.

Noticing that Kuja had left the door unlocked and open, she was ready to spring outside and attempt an escape. Kuja saw this and prepared a spell from the

palm of his hand, which immediately prompted Hilda to stop and sit back on her bed, worried of her own life. She knew Kuja had enough powers to decimate her from this world before she could even act on her own. “Hildagarde Fabool, you are not going anywhere,” the silver-haired nobleman said, his smile shifting into a wicked grin. “It is wiser for you to remain here, for I will take care of you in this cage.”

All these allusions of “taking care of her” terrified the woman. Afraid of what the man might do to her, from her defensive instincts, she began to cover her chest and legs with her arms as if she was naked. When Kuja noticed her act to protect her private parts, he began to laugh. ‘Milady, are you insinuating that we might be going to violate your body?’ the man exclaimed with more giggles. “You might see us as malevolent, simply put, as the bad guys, me and my younger brother, but you can remain assured. I promise you that we are never going to stoop so low as to claim dominance over your body without your consent. We are not like these dirty Gaians whose intentions are only filled with thoughts of pleasures with the acts of reproduction. In all honesty, I do not think our

different genetic setups will allow you to bear the child of a Genome."

Silence dropped on her. From what the man had just revealed, she was unable to make out any information that came in. This was too much puzzling details in one go…

Why did he even mention dirty "*Gaians*"? Was he not from Gaia? '*Claim dominance over your body?*' Was this Kuja's personal view on rape? "*Pleasures with the acts of reproduction?*" Who would even use that term for sexual intercourses? "*Genetic setups?*" What did the word "genetic" even mean?

And last of all, bear the child of a "*Genome*"?

Hilda became lost in thoughts, struggling to figure out everything Kuja had just told her. No matter what correlation and links she could possibly find between all these unfamiliar terms and wording, she still didn't dissect anything that could offer more sense in this. These were all terms from another world, a world that might not even be Gaia itself.

"What do you mean… by all that? This is so confusing…" she asked, grabbing the sides of her head.

“Oh? Right,” the young man said before a fit of chuckles came. “Of course, my privileged knowledge is not available to the lowly Gaians such as you. But fear not, your humble presence here is greatly appreciated, and for that, I will not let you down and leave you to oblivion. I shall tell you everything.”

Hilda gulped, still not understanding him. “Everything?”

The man added, “Why not? It’s been so tiresome, you know, to keep all these plans for world domination for myself. It’s been twenty-three years of my life, planning this all without having anyone to share the pleasure of my history.”

“What about your little brother?” Hilda said out of instincts.

“Oh, you mean Zidane?” Kuja commented, his smile gone shortly before it came back as a mocking grin with more laughs. “Yes, certainly. Zidane does listen to me bragging about my life and everything all the time. However, he had been created as such that he’s quick to be lost in thoughts after hearing me brag for too long. He might be a powerful little angel, but his very short attention span makes him the little brat everyone knows.”

“Kuja! I’m just here! I hear you, dammit!” Hilda could hear the voice of the younger sibling from the other side of the door. Zidane must not be that far, probably there just in case Hilda would have attempted to escape…

There, another term which unsettled the woman.

He had been created.

Created.

Was this Kuja’s way of saying how one was born?

…

As the days and weeks progressed, Hilda even began to feel at home in this strange comfort of having nothing productive to do and being prisoner in her own airship. When she was alone, which was, truth be told, most of the times, she’d read the books available in the cabin or draw random scribbles when she saw Zidane’s own drawings scattered. At first, she had been surprised by the tailed boy’s own talent at drawing, but she considered herself more talented than him.

Whenever they were docked somewhere, the brothers locked her cabin door to prevent her escape,

but knowing they were always in unknown worlds, Hilda would rather remain safe in her familiar bedroom. When they took off in the air, she was allowed to freely walk on the decks since there was no way she could escape from the sky above.

Zidane was usually the one to bring her daily meals, which consisted of decent amount of food prepared with care by either of the brothers. They would bring more to her if they knew they were going to be gone for few days, but they always came back after a week, at most. Kuja would come about once in a while to tell her about all his mastermind plans, with Zidane accompanying him sometimes. However, it was quite rare to see the younger boy ever open his mouth whenever the elder one spoke.

And this was how Hilda learned of the knowledge known only by the Terran brothers, mainly, Kuja and Zidane’s strange origins as Angels of Death.

At first, the revelation had shocked her. Like everyone, she had questioned about the origin of their tails, which she had made the assumption that it was a family hereditary mutation, or simply another race of unknown humans from the Outer Continent. After all, if it weren’t for their tails, they’d pass as

normal humans. It seemed the answer to their tails question lied deeper than she had imagined, where the answer was found much farther on a planet called Terra, a now parasitic world hidden inside Gaia itself after a failed attempt at a fusion of the two planets.

Terra, a dead planet ruled by a dark master, a master that Kuja despised with a hatred much bigger than his own vanity, a hatred which he managed to shove upon his younger brother who hardly remembered his life on the bare, empty planet.

But their origins were one of her least concerning problems.

When Kuja's aura appeared so cold despite his enthusiasm when speaking of his plans for wars and calculated kills, it seemed that murder was an even more casual subject for them, but especially to Zidane. The boy executed his brother's orders like it was a task as simple as tidying his own bedroom, and killing was part of his every day life, whether his unlucky victims were random monsters, other bad guys and even good guys, like their "adoptive mother". While they both felt no remorse over the loss of lives of others, it was harder to picture a young Zidane committing into such atrocities.

Because of the boy's colder demeanor, Hilda feared Zidane more than Kuja who had already opened to her more.

And now she wondered.

Was Zidane the one who had killed the King, five years ago?

Yes, the boy was there when it happened. A dragon had devoured the King, which the soldiers who had discovered the scene had assumed to be the truth because they had seen the dragon with blood on its mouth before it had escaped. They had seen deep wounds that had looked like fangs marks on the King's body and even the child's.

Zidane's presence with the King back then seemed too much of a coincidence now.

Hilda was too afraid to ask about this. Kuja had revealed most of his plans, but she knew there still were some hidden parts in their history.

Today, she was allowed to walk out of the deck.

As Kuja put it, she was gifted with this generous offer for being a good obedient girl for remaining

collected through this ordeal and for allowing him to brag about his life non-stop. She deserved to get a closer look at the Outer Continent where she had nowhere else to run, after all. Staying close to the Genome brothers was her best bet to stand alive and keeping her life stayed one of her top priorities. From the distance, she was able to spot the great majestic Iifa Tree which was killing their planet in a slow death. Kuja had told her about the tree before, but Hilda never had the privilege to take a good look at it. She was impressed by its gigantic mass and height, which was even bigger than what she heard of the Cleyra's giant tree in the Burmecia kingdom. What remained more impressive were the roots which she recognized as the same ones scattered across the Mist Continent. So, all these mysterious giant roots took their origins from the same tree to the other side of the ocean…

Walking on the earth ground felt so alien after having been stuck in an airship for so long. It was like her body gained more weight simply by stepping on the unmoving dirt. While the area surrounding the Iifa Tree was a fascinating view, she quickly lost interest and went after the fauna and the flowers around instead.

The blending of the pure air and the intoxicating Mist gave her an uncomfortable headache, but this was better than staying in the cabin all day long. Both Kuja and Zidane appeared unaffected by the Mist because of their nature as vessels for souls, but Kuja made himself reassuring that short-term exposition to it will do her no harm.

She continued to explore the environment, not paying attention to where she was going until she was joined by Kuja.

“Lovely place, isn’t it?” he told her with his sweet, caring voice. Hilda had gotten used to his bittersweet tone by now.

“So, this is the Iifa Tree, the Terran magical tree that disrupts the cycle of the souls on Gaia,” Hilda commented with a sigh.

“You seem to remember my lessons well, Milady,” a pleased Kuja complimented on the young woman. “Certainly better than what my little brother can achieve.”

Always speaking of the younger sibling like a brat. Frowning at him, Hilda inquired, “Why do you look down upon your brother so much?”

Kuja had not expected that question.

Trying to think through an answer to Hilda's question, he had not noticed how long his mouth had been hung open for a moment. This was enough to break conflicts in the depth of his mind, whenever he truly meant what he said about his brother. Kuja had never reflected how his words might have some deeper impact on Zidane as the teen boy still followed him to no end without questioning his choices. The blond young man had even agreed with the extraction process which might hurt the one he loved. Kuja did call Zidane a brat from times to times, even in front of him and others just so Kuja could assert his superior intelligence over him. It was to show how Zidane was a boy without much maturity.

And then another prospect suddenly crossed. Even if Zidane was soon to reach his sixteenth year of life, the age which Gaians civilizations said to be the portal to adulthood, the thought of the teenager physically growing older than Kuja never spanned. The elder sibling had been created with the appearance and endeavor of an adult who looked barely older than twenty. He should remain with that physical appearance until he was to die in a long while, or even forever, like the immortal Genomes without a soul. In a few years, even if Garland had

warned him about Zidane's physical age that was to slow down during his adolescence, eventually, the boy will look older than him.

The aspect that Zidane currently looked so young made it easier for Kuja to call his brother with bratty names or mock him. Zidane never appeared too annoyed over this, but Kuja knew the young adolescent had the bad habit of keeping emotions and other things for himself.

No, all of Kuja's inferiority complexes had begun as soon as Garland had revealed Zidane's existence to Kuja, that mere tiny Genome with no sense of life who now looked up to him so much.

Even if that perfect Angel of Death specimen was supposed to replace the defect…

Yet, Zidane had no care whether Kuja was a defect or not to Garland, so why was Kuja so intend to see his brother as inferior? Was this to make himself feel superior, like he had total control over the perfection?

Maybe Hilda was right.

…

Hilda forgot how the scene had started as everything went in the blink of an eye. It began with a resounding roar, and then a blaring curse coming from Zidane further away from them. When Hilda and Kuja both heard the younger boy, Kuja immediately rushed to his cry's direction, leaving Hilda fending for herself alone. From where Hilda stood, a terrifying scene happened before her.

Two powerful, wild Silver Dragons attacked Zidane.

Of course, Hilda guessed that neither of these dragons were owned by the brothers. Their pet dragon, despite being feral at times, never attacked them, so these two monsters were wild ones that roamed around the Iifa Tree. The brothers lost no time and immediately dashed together to take on the two monstrosities. From where she stood, Hilda was truly amazed by their attacking stance, like they were in perfect control and very capable of fending away these powerful dragons without problems, despite their stressful moment. Kuja flashed away with black magic attacks that were beyond the woman's knowledge and Zidane's fast and subpar athleticism moved him like a lightning with his two flashing daggers.

But even these agile and powerful brothers weren’t invincible. They were unable to fight off these monsters without sustaining some injuries themselves. When the Silver Dragons escaped after surrendering the fight, the two young man found themselves weakened with bites and claws marks along with several enormous bruises from nasty spells naturally known by these wild creatures. Having rushed on his own with melee attacks, Zidane was the one to have undergone most of the damage with his entire attire torn and drenched of his blood.

This was where Hilda witnessed the unexpected.

As Zidane collapsed near unconscious from the pain of his deep wounds, an injured Kuja gathered his weak energy to heal himself with a short Cure spell and then combined more of his spiritual power to restore his brother. Worried and not even caring that he was being carefully observed by the Gaian woman, Kuja dropped over Zidane’s body. His composure maintained calm and reassurance, but his silver tail gave away few nervous movements and trembled with fear, the fear of losing a loved one. His shivering hands struggled to find the right spells to cast Curaga on Zidane, which triggered the younger one’s eyes to open weakly.

“K-Kuja…?”

“Zidane, you’re okay.”

Kuja’s voice still was calm and serene, but it was obvious he tried keeping his nervous stance under control.

“You’re okay, K… Kuja… T-That’s great…”

Yet, Zidane’s voice held so much more emotions.

Careful to not press his brother with any more of his own weight, Kuja stepped himself aside to leave some room for Zidane to get back on his feet. However, the younger sibling found it difficult to raise his upper body and he shivered. Kuja wrapped his arms around Zidane, rising him against his own body to offer him a long, warming hug, his face snuggling into the teen’s hair as he stroked his back gently, appeasing both brothers. While they remained into this long embrace after experiencing such a nasty life and death moment, their tails slowly brushed left and right on the ground as if they were content that both got out alive.

Despite their cold behaviors, the brothers truly cared about each other.

This was a side Hilda had never expected from them, a side they'd never shown to the public's eyes. So, they weren't completely emotionless bastards.

"Thank you for the food, Zidane. You and your brother are too kind."

It had been two whole months since her capture. Kuja seemed to have depleted whatever he had to say about his mastermind plan and he kept repeating the same things over and over in different terms. Thankfully, over time, she had learned to soften to Zidane who wasn't a particularly big talker, but he did enjoy having some words with her, a little, at least. It was to the point she felt safe with their presence whenever they went out for a walk together.

It was so surprising, being captured by two aliens, only to earn their respects, more than she might ever get from her cheating husband Cid. They would bring her the food and books she craved for, they would never approach her more than a meter away from her private, invisible bubble and when she was too tired, they would keep the place quiet.

For two beings created to bring chaos upon their world, they certainly acted like gentlemen.

But even though she resented Cid for that meaningless affair with another woman, she missed her time with the past him. She had even asked few times the Genome brothers about Cid's whereabouts, and they had told her they never heard of an official announcement about him being an oglop or anything. As Kuja cited, "no news is good news".

She hoped he was right…

Nevertheless, today didn't seem like a very good day for Zidane. The boy brought her the food, but he did not greet her or respond to her thankful words as he would do all the time. He was about to leave her the food and turn to the cabin door before the woman suddenly approached him with a question.

"Is something bothering you?"

Now, her question had brought the attention from the young boy who froze on place. For a moment, he appeared lost, contemplating the emptiness before he turned back to the lady. "W-What? N-No, nothing," Zidane stuttered, trying to settle down, but the frenetic movements of his tail betrayed him. Over living around them, Hilda had learned to read

their tails' movements to check if they were being honest or nervous. She could tell that the tailed boy wasn't used to being asked such caring questions.

She will have to soothe him with a more straightforward question. "Can you tell me where Kuja is right now?"

Her plan to calm him paid off, and the movement of his tail slowed down. Looking to the floor, Zidane asserted, "He's in Dali. He's busy conceiving a new type of a more powerful Black Mage with the help of Zorn and Thorn. He's also doing some tests with the other Black Mages."

"I see," Hilda added. With a sigh, Zidane readied himself to leave the room until he was stopped by the woman again, which startled him. "Wait, Zidane, before you go…"

"Mmm, yes?" he asked.

Hilda was shocked. She had not anticipated the boy to actually stay and listen to her pleas. Perhaps asking what was bothering him had softened his heart more, which made him open up to her. "I… I want to know something…" the lady revealed shyly, though her determination grew in intensity as she caught her straight posture. After all, she feared the

boy might go on a tantrum with what she was about to say. “I… just need to know, since your brother always tells me everything.”

This time, as expected, Zidane appeared upset. “What do you want to know?” he asked, his tone lower but colder.

“Why?”

Now, Hilda wished she could slap her forehead in shame. That had sounded more like a plea than a question.

Zidane frowned deeper. “Why… what?”

Getting hold of herself, Hilda carried on. “Why… are you and Kuja doing this? Why do you want to rule the world, both Gaia and Terra? You two… have already achieved wealth, powers and a certain freedom. What is more to gain?”

Within an instant of silence, Zidane’s expression softened. He looked down to the side again, an air of regret within his eyes. Gently biting his lips, he said, “I don’t know. I don’t want this. Kuja does.”

Hilda couldn’t wait any longer. She had to know the real answer. “Then why does Kuja want to rule both worlds? Why does he take so much time to

achieve this? He could have funded the factory in Dali by himself. He could have created a senseless war with his endless supply of Black Mages against the Gaians. He could have extracted the Eidolons from the Princess and use them to see fit. Why corrupting the loving Queen Brahne?"

"I… don't know."

This had shut the lady for an instant. This couldn't be the only answer! There had to be something more concrete… "Is… that it?"

Slowly, Zidane looked up, his mind lost in deep thoughts. "Kuja… He wants to prove himself," he revealed.

"Prove himself? About what?" Hilda asked. She no longer feared Zidane's reaction. "He's already proved himself as a mastermind! To who?"

"To him."

"Him?"

"Garland."

This was the first time the name ever came to her. "Who's Garland?" she questioned.

"A mean old man."

His voice had gotten a little sad…

Now it all came back to her. Kuja had often spoken of some old master who was constantly monitoring both Genome brothers from above like an all-mighty god, even as they freely wandered on Gaia. The man's spying matters only made their freedom an illusion. It was the same old man who had created Kuja and Zidane who, for some reason, deemed Kuja as the failed prototype and Zidane as the perfect specimen. She was unable to grasp why one was better than the other, but one detail was certain; Zidane was the more easily influenced one.

But as their living creator, that mighty old man Garland could take their lives and even their souls away from them in one instant if they were to stray away from their purposes as Angels of Death. Even to Hilda, the prospect of losing a soul appeared worse than death itself, which was probably why both brothers had to comply with Garland's desires in some ways without having him be aware of their plans to overthrow him.

Kuja must want to surpass the limits Garland had implemented into their lives to carry on with their inflicted purposes.

“Is this because… Garland thinks of Kuja as a failure?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Zidane answered fast. With such confidence in his answer, this must be the truth. “He wants to prove Garland that he’s capable of things that so few can achieve, to prove that Garland was wrong about him.”

What Kuja and Zidane had done in the past might be unforgivable to the normal eyes. Yet, at the same time, having seen their softer sides and knowing their forced purposes as servants of Terra, she couldn’t feel much hatred toward them anymore. Their hands were tied for their entire existence where their free will was the only freedom granted to them. The idea of having been created for the sole reason to start a war for their master’s need was a scary concept. Before they were even born, their destinies were already predetermined by their dark master…

But what about Zidane? If Kuja was capable of such feat without too much efforts, then why had Garland created another Genome with a soul? This younger creation didn’t even wish for a war… “Then… why are you following your brother into

his plan?" she asked, not caring if the question might anger the boy.

Indeed, the question raised more shock from him. He replied, "Huh? Because he's my brother."

So, Zidane followed Kuja, simple as that. Had the man truly raised the child into doing whatever he wanted? What a sad life, to be manipulated by someone manipulated by another already. The blond boy seemed to have it worse than his older sibling, though he did not seem aware of it. She inquired, "If Kuja hated you, would you still follow him?"

His voice returned to his furious tone. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're blindly following Kuja, aren't you?"

"What?" His frustration was now gone, having left place to shock instead. "Kuja's the only one I can trust and he's the only one who likes me, that's why! Oh, and our dragon friend too…"

Poor Zidane. This was such a childish protest worthy of an ignorant child who could not grasp much of the world, having been his older brother's shadow all his life. "Then, why are you keeping me alive, if I am your enemy?" she asked, but

immediately after, she gulped, not realizing that question might be her life or death mark.

Luckily for her, Zidane didn't seem too bothered by the question. "Because Kuja told me to."

"Is… that it?"

"Yes."

He sounded so certain of the answer. If it weren't for Kuja, Hilda might have already joined the cycle of souls… only to become a frantic lost soul part of the Mist. The thought granted her shivers, but she made good progresses with Zidane opening to her in a short time. It seemed his swayed side came out of him more when Kuja was not present.

"Wait, Zidane," Hilda uttered before the teenager took another step to the door. "I have another question. Last one, I promise."

"Okay, go ahead," he said.

The fact that Zidane had not sighed or given an exhausted look at her came as a surprise. For once, he was willing to wait for her question. However, she dreaded the boy's reaction regarding her next question. After all, this was about a greater mystery that had been haunting people for five long years.

For sure, this boy knew the truth, because he was there when it happened. He had seen everything.

“What had happened to King Alexander?” Hilda managed to ask with a strange calm.

“Huh?”

“The King of Alexandria, Princess Garnet’s father.”

A chill ran down through his skin at the name of the Princess. Her name affected him so much even the fur on his tail bristled up. “He was killed,” he said.

Shaking her head slowly, Hilda added, “Yes, we all know that. What I want to know is… who killed him?”

The young boy blinked for a short moment before he gave an answer. “A dragon. I’ve seen her kill him.”

There! This was the biggest clue to her suspicion that had haunted her for all these years! This was such a tiny slip of the tongue, but that was enough to reveal the answer to this mystery. After clearing her throat, she asked, “How… How do you know the dragon was a ‘her’?”

In that moment, Zidane realized his slip of the tongue. Unable to continue with another answer, he looked away, his glare filled with some guilt. He shut his eyes, unsure where this whole situation of questions and answers will lead him to. When he opened his eyes again, when his face was directed to the side…

His glare was devoid of emotion, like an empty vessel.

Instead of the anger he expected from the lady, Hilda's eyes held compassion. "You were there, five years ago, when the King was killed. You poor boy, you were only ten years old at the time. Murder is a very terrifying concept for a child."

Another awkward silence, but Zidane wasn't reaching for the door. He remained frozen, waiting for what was to come next. Satisfied that he was listening, Hilda continued. "But… I learned so much about you and your brother. Murder… is not a terrifying concept to you, even in your past. Am I right?"

"W-What?"

The reaction Hilda expected. "Murder… is part of your life. You and Kuja were created to kill… to

murder, as Angels of Death."

For more seconds, the silence longed, and Zidane still had his look away. "Then tell me why, Zidane. Why did *you* murder the King?"

There was another awkward silence at Hilda's plea to get an answer. She had made sure that she had put some emphasis on the word "you" so Zidane detected the importance of that word. She waited for the teenager to say something, do something. After more wait, he remained quiet, never moving from his spot, never shifting his head to another direction.

And then, a chilling sight occurred.

A smile crawling to Zidane's lips.

"Kuja wanted the King dead for his plan to proceed."

Why was he smiling? Was this a smile of bliss?

Hilda shivered. Why had the kid suddenly become a calm, mad man? "His… plan?"

His eyes now shining with an odd euphoria and psychosis, Zidane stared up like he was reviving his maddening, purifying murder again. His voice gaining volume and life, he carried on. "To corrupt Queen Brahne into wanting a war, for her to fund his

war vessels. Kuja knew the Queen would have never taken this decision with the King. The King's will was too strong to be corrupted. He would have never wanted this war. The Queen was nothing but a vessel on her own without him. Kuja had ordered the King to be murdered. I had murdered him with my own hands."

His smile was now swept away, but the cold, insane glare remained. "But I had made a miscalculation. When I had thought that he was dead, he still lived through his injuries and he still had enough vigor to catch and injure me. I screamed and we bit each other until the King could no longer move. Mahila was there, watching me the entire time, her head through the window, waiting for me to finish the job. My scream had alerted the guards from the floor below, and I had no time to escape. Mahila was distressed by my wounds, so she licked me and got her lips full of blood. When the guards came to the room, I had to act as if she had devoured the King and attacked me. She escaped after the scene. I had to put the blame on her so she could escape without the guards going after her. No one would have bothered to pursue a flying dragon if she truly was the killer."

The wicked atmosphere he was projecting felt like a heavy burden of insanity and ecstasy, like Zidane came straight from the underworld as a mischievous devil. His eyes and voice had been so cold as he told the tale like he absolutely had no care for the living other than his brother and his dragon.

This poor boy, having been raised into a true Angel of Death from the day he had been created…

“I see…” Hilda said. She wasn’t ready to admit that she was more fearful of the teenager now that she had seen his frozen side. “I assume… that Mahila is your silver dragon, the same one I’ve seen with you before?”

This time, the mad, cold demeanor left him suddenly, like his normal persona was returned to him. “Mahila’s not mine,” he objected, furious with his childish tone now perceptible. “She’s a Silver Dragon on her own. She’s friend with us and Kuja, that’s all. She’s not one of these pets and livestock you use for your own convenience.”

Yet, despite being an antagonist to her eyes, Zidane still cared for his loved ones like no one else, enough to consider his dragon as her own individual. Hilda couldn’t call him a completely cold person.

With a sigh, Hilda began an imitation of a caring smile, which, in a sense, was a true smile. This was to show that she was satisfied and relieved with the answer the boy had given now that she got the confirmation she coveted. After huffing, she said, “I thank you for your time, Zidane. You can go now.”

When she was returning to her meal that had gotten colder over all the talking, she heard another last call from the boy before he closed and locked the door.

“… Bye, Hilda.”

Author’s note*: This chapter took me the longest because of few inconsistencies with the in-game information and my original ideas for this chapter. Also, why wasn’t Hilda made prisoner in that room in Mount Gulug just like in the game? To be honest, I thought this would be illogical since there’s a magic seal preventing people to get in the place, and in the game, Kuja sent Zidane’s team to get the Gulug stone that will unlock the seal in the first place. Yeah, videogames logic.*

Also, as to what Kuja said to Hilda about reproduction, personally, I don’t think Genomes and

Humans / Summoners are genetically compatible. They might look similar, but they hail from another planet. Sorry to the Zidane x Garnet fans!

Chapter 14: Escape

Sorry for the later update than usual. But I still thank everyone for your patience!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 14: Escape

“Isn’t this a lovely sight from here?”

“Man, we’re too far above. It’s hard to spot the actors from the castle’s top and I can barely hear them, let alone the orchestra.”

“Stop complaining. We’re not here to watch the play. We’re just here to make sure the Princess will be safe and sound after her birthday.”

“Why? They’re celebrating her sixteenth birthday, literally the door to her adulthood! Her two most loyal guards are literally standing by her sides, with a wall behind her seat and no threat in front of her but the play, which isn’t even a threat! The whole audience has their eyes set on her! Nothing can happen to her, dammit!”

“Ha, ha! Are you insinuating that you are trusting these Gaians into protecting her?”

“They did a good job when I wasn’t looking. I mean, she’s still alive to see this play today, so yeah, I trust they can do it just fine.”

“Only because you killed her assailants years ago.”

“… Okay, fine.”

This was it, the day Kuja had been waiting forever since he had his eyes set on the Princess’s Eidolons. Thanks to his deeper researches in the royal library, he had been able to find a detailed drawing of the patterns needed for the extraction process. Thanks to Zidane’s artistic talents, the teen had managed to reproduce it perfectly in the castle’s secret dungeon in the basement. Even if Princess Garnet’s true birthdate was unknown, even to the Queen who used her true deceased daughter’s birthdate as her reference, Kuja assumed it was now safe to proceed with the extraction.

Of course, he will have to make sure he was doing this for the Queen. The thrill of owning and using these legendary Eidolons had far blinded the woman who hungered for more power. The same

story went with her current dormant Black Mages in Dali that awaited their awakening so she will use them as tools of war. She was so certain to win with these. Through all these blinding power-hungry needs, Queen Brahne had no suspicion of Kuja's true plan to get rid of her.

To celebrate the day on the dawn of this new year and century, the Queen had hired a theater troupe from Lindblum going by the name of Tantalus. Performing on their own grand airship that also served as a stage, they were reciting Lord Avon's most famous play which also was Princess Garnet's favorite, "I Want to Be Your Canary". The romantic story told the tale of a forbidden love between a princess and a commoner man. Why this play was Garnet's favorite was a question that was haunting Zidane's mind as he supposed she might relate to the princess in this story. Perhaps she was in love with a commoner too.

How he wished to be that commoner… But with the years keeping an eye on her, he did a great job holding up his feelings for her, just as Kuja advised.

However, keeping his feelings for himself was taunting his very soul for years. He felt shattered from the inside, but he would rather not let Kuja

know about this, or his older brother might see him as the weak and cheesy young man.

A roar above in the sky ringed to their ears. They looked up and they were pleasantly surprised by the arrival of their dragon which slowly landed beside them with another big prey she had slain earlier. From the beginning of her adolescence, bringing them dead animals or monsters was part of her own ritual to tell the Genome brothers that they were part of her family. It was a strange habit as the brothers had never taught her anything like this, so Kuja had dismissed it as a part of the Silver Dragons' inner instincts. To avoid waste of resources, Zidane sometimes cut parts of these preys and prepared cooked meat with them, but from where they stood, they simply left the dead animal on the roof, much to the dragon's disappointment.

"Hey, at least you came in time," Zidane told the dragon with a grin, trying to reassure her after she gave away a sad whimper. "You'll be able to check on the play too." Not that Mahila was interested in plays. Instead, she just went on devouring the prey the brothers were not touching.

But as the play progressed, Zidane reached the point he was no longer paying attention to the actors

below. He began a long yawn of boredom and crawled himself on Kuja's knees, stomach down. "Kuja! I'm bored!" the teenager complained with a hoarser, yet childish tone. He made himself heavier on his brother's knees and started to whack Kuja on the side with his tail, like a typical bratty sibling.

To mock his brother, Kuja leaned his elbows on Zidane's back before he dropped his chin on his hands, smiling. He chuckled. "I thought you were a decent actor. You should enjoy this play and its actors' performance."

"Didn't you just say that we're here to keep an eye on Garnet?" the younger Genome protested, dropping his arms, legs, tail and head as if they felt heftier.

"I am certain you can do both at the same time," Kuja retorted, his tone teasing the boy, to which Zidane grumbled.

Annoyed by Kuja's mischievous comment, as he raised his head, he exclaimed, "Hey! You know I'm awful at multitasking!"

Kuja was going to make a short mention on how Master Garland could still see Zidane as the perfect Angel of Death despite his short attention and his

obvious flaws, things that Kuja and even many Gaians could overcome like a breeze. However, the critique Hilda uttered him months ago about always looking down upon his little brother had a certain impact to his spoken words. He had taken the custom of refraining to mock Zidane too much, or at least less than before.

That, of course, Zidane didn’t seem to have noticed. Perhaps being mocked by Kuja had already been anchored to his core.

Minutes elapsed. Mahila had fallen asleep for some while. Kuja enjoyed the play despite the lack of clear noises from the stage except a faint sound from the Tantalus orchestra. He kept on commenting how well the troupe performed and he even suggested Zidane that he should join them. Zidane ignored all of Kuja’s blathering and let himself space out from times to times, lost in thoughts and imagining things in his mind that did not concern him or the Princess’s safety. Right now, all he wished was to wander and explore around freely, doing things on his own and enjoying some fun.

However, as he drew his focus back to the play, right at the part where two actors were performing a dramatic, yet sensational sword duel to impress the

nobles' audience, something felt amiss. As the spectators were too enthralled by the clash of the two dueling men in the play, no one had noticed that the central part of this birthday celebration had vanished.

Princess Garnet was no longer sitting on her seat.

Worried of her absence, Zidane immediately got on his feet and prepared to dash to the below grounds. "Kuja, I'm going to find Garnet," Zidane said as he bounced from the roof, disappearing to the below levels. Kuja had barely paid attention to his brother as he didn't even bother to give him a reply or turn to him. Instead, he hushed at him with a humph.

After having spied the Princess and the others for years, Zidane knew the castle by heart. It'd been a breeze to navigate around each corner without being spotted by anyone. However, his search for the Princess was starting to stretch longer than expected after he had checked through Garnet's most predictable spots, including her private quarters. He rushed to the ground floor, where the guests and soldiers usually wandered around freely. He

scrutinized all the rooms of this floor, in the library and even in the kitchen. Who knew, perhaps Garnet might be in need of a snack.

Yet, she was still nowhere to be found.

Now then, Garnet couldn’t have gone too far. The entire castle ground was well guarded, with soldiers scattered everywhere. He ran to the least likely place he’d find her, and before he even reached the door to the lockers room of the Pluto Knights, he heard some strange noises. When he made himself careful to open the door, two knights were sound asleep on the floor, bare chest with only their underwear on. Upon closer inspection, he realized the men weren’t really sleeping. Rather, they had been knocked unconscious.

Wait, so there were intruders somewhere. Who could have done this? It couldn’t have been perpetrated by the Princess herself… could it be?

As Zidane was lost to ponder, sounds were heard not too far outside the room. Rather than noises, it sounded like two people discussing of something, though he couldn’t make out anything. Like a predator, he launched himself in silence to the sounds which could be heard on the stairs above him.

Then it hit him. This was Garnet's voice!

As he climbed the stairs, ready to reveal himself, he faced Garnet adorned with a long white cloak and… another Pluto Knight?

"Oh, hey, Garnet, you're here!" Zidane greeted the young woman by surprise, much to her shock and the knight's. After all, Zidane was usually not granted official access to the castle unless accompanied by the Queen's personal advisor Kuja, but Garnet knew of his mischievous ways of bypassing all guards without being seen. She had gotten used by his surprising, unexpected presence within the castle's walls, but today appeared different.

Distress seemed to wave over her upon his presence.

But Zidane noticed something else that was off.

With the years of the tailed boy's presence in this castle, Garnet had gotten used to being called by her first name only by Zidane as all the others addressed her by royal designations. Let it be Princess, Princess Garnet, Your Highness and even sometimes her complete name, Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII. Besides her mother, Zidane had no care to call

by her first name so casually it no longer bothered her. Yet, guards and servants around would always seem outraged by the very informal way Zidane addressed the Princess.

However, what seemed off to him was the Pluto Knight here who didn't seem affected at all by that small detail of Zidane calling the Princess by her first name, raising more suspicion.

He had his hands ready to catch his daggers at any time now.

"Z-Zidane…?!" the Princess stuttered after a quick shocked bounce. "What are you doing here?!"

Her terrified tone raised even more suspicion. Why was she nervous all of a sudden by his presence?

"Oh, I've been wandering around, checking the play," Zidane answered, hiding the fact that he had actually been searching her for a while.

"Is that so?" Garnet regained the composure of her voice and her pose while forming a shy smile. "Well, you should return to your seat, then. The best part should be coming shortly."

“Nan, too boring,” Zidane added with a yawn and then a stretch of the body. “But it’s your favorite play, so I’m guessing you don’t really want to miss that part, right?”

“Zidane…”

From the withering expression on her face, Zidane recognized something was up. Looking concerned, he asked, “What’s the matter?”

A sound behind caught him by surprise. Thrust into instincts, he bounced away and turned around, only to discover that a second knight had just tried to knock him down with a hammer.

“Hey!” Zidane yelled after the knight who now had swapped his hammer with a sword in hands. Losing no time, the blond teenager unsheathed his daggers and adopted his attacking stance. This was now he recalled the two unconscious knights in the locker room. This man had stolen an armor! His eyes focusing on the man before him, he started growling as he suddenly recognized one of the actors of the play. “You’re not a real knight! You’re __”

Before he could do anything, his world abruptly faded to complete darkness at the same time a

painful blow to the head was felt from behind.

"***Have you found her yet?***"

No answer. It was unusual for Zidane to not give an immediate answer to Kuja's telepathic pleas, unless the boy was furious against him or he was asleep. Sometimes, Kuja couldn't tell when the other was furious as the younger Genome had the bad habit to bear an eternal frown on his expression to scare people away in public, even with Kuja. The only exceptional case was whenever Zidane was in the presence of the Princess where his expression always softened, but this was another story.

Zidane's silence in their connected minds had never bothered Kuja before, but this time, the older brother faced with the problem of having a more difficult moment to focus on the play.

And Princess Garnet still hadn't returned.

Thinking through all the possibilities, Kuja suspected that the princess might have been planning an escape route for a while as he knew she feared her mother's growing madness. If ever, the Princess probably wished to seek help or simply

escape from this pending doom looming over Alexandria. This was why finding her right now was an urgent matter.

He attempted another message through their connections. "***Hey Zidane, if you hear me, say a word.***"

There was a long silence.

"***I'm serious.***"

No words.

Something had happened.

Kuja might be a mighty mage with a magic potential greater than most of Gaians, but he had never been granted athletic abilities like his younger brother. If anything, climbing down the walls and tall structures to reach the ground level from this roof, something that Zidane was capable of, had bestowed his sibling the nickname of Monkey Boy from the Gaians. However, Kuja refused to see that silly nickname befall on his delicate and noble persona. The young man looked to the far below grounds from the roof, trying to find a way to descend without harming himself. After all, they had come all the way up here thanks to their Silver Dragon. However, he couldn't get back below with a

gigantic dragon who likely was to get attacked and even killed by the infantry.

Well, he could easily get rid of their attackers with his grandiose magic, but this will be an unnecessary carnage.

And despite his subpar magic, he had never found a way to fly or glide by himself.

If something had happened to Zidane somewhere below, Kuja will have to find him, all by himself.

Scrutinizing his environment to find a pathway to the ground, Kuja gulped when he didn’t spot any easy way. The closest open window by the roof was located few meters below his feet. His best bet to reach for the opening was to hang from the border of the roof with his hands, to curl his long tail to the window, to drop his whole self and then to hang his body with his appendage.

Just like a normal monkey. The simple idea gave him a senseless shiver.

If only he had the smaller body shape of his brother, perhaps he could achieve something like this… For now, he had to test the strength of his furred tail by rolling it around a random pole on the roof. If the tail supported his weight…

No, no… This was looking too silly and dumb for his noble and slender silhouette!

Hopefully, no one else was looking at him…

"***Ku… ja…?***"

Wait, Zidane just responded!

"***Zidane?***"

"***Kuja… I'm sorry… I got knocked down and I lost her…***"

Wait a second. Did he just let the Princess escape? How could this happen? Zidane should be better than that!

Well, at least, Kuja had just been saved from some humiliation from having to act like a monkey for few seconds, even though no one had seen him… Except Mahila, but Kuja's shenanigans were the least of her worries.

Dammit! He hoped the Princess hadn't escaped too far away. With so many guards around, it was near impossible to avoid them all, unless she came and escaped by the air just as the brothers came, or if they were named Zidane Tribal. He was going to order his brother to find her until something on the play stage caught his attention.

When he blinked and focused to the stage, he rubbed his eyes to be certain he'd been right about his assumptions. He couldn't believe it! After all these months, he had always thought the royal jesters' stupidity had brought the first result of his years of researches and experimentation to naught. Except he had been wrong the whole time.

The first Black Mage prototype was on the stage, running across with a rat kid who Kuja recognized as the Burmecian Prince despite his strange commoner attire. Both were being pursued by Pluto Knights.

How the prototype still managed to maintain its life to this day was no longer a concern to the man who had already factored an army of bigger Black Mages, all ready to go as soon as Queen Brahne will give the green light. However, what appeared more startling to him was to see that prototype cast a magnificent Fire magic attack at the knights who avoided the blast. Instead, the Fire coursed its way through the cloaked girl in the play who began screaming at the flame around her costume and throwing the burning cloak away out of fear.

Even from his high spot, Kuja heard the audience gasped. He smiled.

Princess Garnet stood on the stage, struggling to extinguish the flame remnants away from her.

"***Don't worry about this,***" Kuja sent to Zidane with a chuckle. "***She's not far. She's standing on the Prima Vista stage and she's being cornered by the Pluto Knights and their captain. They will take care of everything, so come back here and observe this magnificent spectacle from above!***"

"***Oh!***" the boy exclaimed in relief in their connected minds. Losing no time and in a matter of minutes, as Kuja continued to appreciate the scene from their roof, Zidane had already reached to their hidden spot by climbing the walls, joining him in the small audience to admire the scene. "Do you think the knights will be able to get her to stay?" Zidane asked his brother.

"What do you think?" Kuja scoffed a giggle. "Weren't you the one who were too confident in their skills to protect her?"

Zidane decided it was wiser to not give a response, or Kuja might get more fun belittling on him. Instead, he remained focused to the scene on the grounds, where the actors were fighting against the Pluto Knights. How could such commoners fight

so well? They undoubtedly were not normal commoners.

Wait a second… He recalled earlier, that fake knight who was with Garnet above the stairs… That disguised knight was one of the actors! He could never forget these strange stitches on his face which he just remembered but had not paid attention to earlier. The one who had knocked him must be him or one of these men on the stage!

Were they planning to capture the Princess?

And without realizing it, his need for revenge resurfacing, he was about to bounce back to the grounds below just to gain the satisfaction of stabbing one of these men. It was until Kuja caught him by the tail, causing Zidane to shriek and drop to his knees. Infuriated by his brother's action, Zidane turned to Kuja and hissed at him. "Kuja! What was that for?!" he screamed at him with clenched teeth, his voice soon shifting into growls.

"Don't you just want to sit down and enjoy the show?" Kuja laughed as he released his brother's appendage. His butt and tail stinging with a small, uncomfortable ache, Zidane rubbed his appendage where Kuja's hand had gripped to. Wincing in pain, he gave the silver-haired man a deeper frown. "The

Queen is part of the audience too. She will do something to stop her daughter. She'd been prepared for everything, including her daughter's eventual escape."

Knowing Kuja was fooling with him, Zidane folded his arms in protest, expecting the elder brother to add more comments to mock his actions. Giving another frown at him and kicking the ground, Zidane walked away and headed to Mahila, offering her some soft nuzzles, nose to nose. With the dragon returning the move with a gentle, affectionate purr, Zidane felt relieved that at least one sentient being respected him regardless of his decisions, whether they were dumb or well-thought.

But as the boy lost his attention on the whole show going on, a grounding sound resounded all around the castle with a slight earthquake beneath along with a hoarse yell of a woman. The brothers recognized the loud voice of the Queen. When they looked down in shock, Zidane was the only one to gasp.

The actors' airship, the immense Prima Vista, was taking off with the Princess on board and the Queen was ordering her soldiers to let out her secret

gigantic weapons from the castle walls and capture the airship.

“They’re kidnapping Garnet! We need to do something!” Zidane yelled as he rushed with a step forward. He didn’t even let Kuja speak his mind when he jumped on Mahila before shouting, “Let’s go save the Princess!”

Spreading her wings, the Silver Dragon jumped and plunged toward the airship with a manic Zidane crouching over her back, ready for some action. As Mahila soared in the wind with a roar, she was approaching the action scene fast. Now standing on balance on the dragon’s back, Zidane was ready to jump off from the sky and save the Princess from the kidnappers.

Until cannons were fired at the ship.

Having never heard such blasting, violent sounds before, Mahila shrieked in fear and she escaped from the scene, causing Zidane to yelp as he lost his balance and dropped on her back. Surprised and distressed by the nervous dragon’s erratic moves, the boy struggled to get a good grip on her until he managed to catch her longer patches of fur from her back. After they were high enough in the sky, when Mahila soothed her panic enough to maintain a

stable flight, Zidane was able to look down upon where the cannon blasts came from. He spotted chained hooks piercing through the grand airship to prevent its escape. However, the Prima Vista was a solid and powerful airship and even the chained hooks weren't enough to hold the gigantic vehicle on place.

And Queen Brahne realized it in time.

With another blaring order at her soldiers, having no care that her daughter was on the airship, the Queen decided it was time to launch their latest straw. As the soldiers prepared their biggest cannon, the Queen pointed toward the ship with a war cry.

Just when the dragon in the sky had completely calmed down and when Zidane told her to get back to Garnet, they were soon plunged into a wide bright, hot light that blinded their entire field of vision for an instant. All the audience and the witnesses screamed and the dragon dashed forward the sky again with another terrified shriek. As the light died down, everyone was offered their biggest shock when they saw a fire monster rushing from the cannon to the airship stage, where the Princess, the remaining Knights Captain and the Tantalus crew fought for their lives.

A Bomb monster! If not eliminating it quickly, it'll grow and grow huge enough to bring its own life to an explosive suicide that might kill everyone, including the Princess!

"***What's the Queen thinking?!***" Zidane screamed in his telepathic mind in protest, never realizing that his brother actually heard him.

But said brother sounded calm as ever. Kuja told his sibling, "***The Queen might be stupider than you think, but she knows what she's doing. She had envisioned her daughter's escape, and thus why all these firing cannons.***"

Just as the audience expected, the big Bomb monster grew bigger and hotter until it exploded into a bright, burning blast as the airship was about to lift off. However, the blast had caused enough damage on the airship that it plunged toward the ground level of the cliffs outside Alexandria, straight into the Mist. Everyone watched helplessly as the Prima Vista descended into the depth of the dangerous grounds, straight to the dark, cursed Evil Forest.

Legends and tales of explorers from the ancient times were that no one ever came out alive from the depth of this wicked forest, all devoured by its insatiable hunger for living things. Yet, if people

knew of these legends, surely, some people had ventured there and made it out alive to tell the tale, right? Evil Forest seemed to be a privileged knowledge which Kuja acquired over the years thanks to his time spent in the library of Alexandria's castle.

"***I know what you're thinking,***" Kuja told his brother in their minds. "***Don't go to the forest. You might make it out alive, but there is a great chance you'll catch a parasitic curse which will devour you from the inside. These parasites cannot be ridden of, even with the most powerful curative spell. Only a special antidote can save you, and unfortunately, I am in no position of an antidote owner. They do not call this place the Evil Forest for nothing.***"

"***But… What about the Princess?! Don't you need her or something?***" Zidane objected, ready to go to the forest anyway.

"***She might make it out alive and well. I have observed the Tantalus crew fight. They are no ordinary actors. They know how to fight better than most of Alexandria's soldiers and guards. They aren't kidnapping the Princess for frivolous***

reasons like a ransom or anything low. They mean no harm and they will protect her at all cost."

"***But…***"

"***And a reminder, if I cannot get her Eidolons, I have other plans ready. We have more years ahead to think of something else.***"

Kuja felt the rage burning from his younger sibling. "***Dammit, Kuja!***" Zidane screamed from the inside, making sure Kuja listened. "***You only care of her Eidolons! You don't care for her safety?! Well, I care about her!***"

"***And I care about you.***"

He froze.

He couldn't believe it. Kuja said it. Zidane wasn't sure what to think about this in his energetic stance, but he suddenly could no longer think of the Princess he loved. The only thought that came up to him was the ringing sound of his brother's words telling him something that brought him the warmth he coveted from others.

Caring words.

Thinking through, Zidane believed it might be wiser to listen to Kuja's advices and leave the

Princess’s fate in the hands of the Tantalus crew in the dark and mysterious forest.

After all, Kuja was the brain of the Tailed Brothers.

Author’s note*: I’ve decided to go to the generic way of replacing Zidane with Blank in this story (like most of AU stories where Zidane is either petrified in the forest or absent). From what I heard, a character looking like Blank was planned to be the main character at first until they changed everything.*

Chapter 15: Betrayal

I guess there's some action in this chapter. And thanks to all who follow this fic!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 15: Betrayal

Their whole trip to the village of Dali on their Silver Dragon's back was done in complete silence, even from within their connected minds. None of the brothers would initiate a conversation nor they would even comment on anything else. From times to times, Kuja turned a glare to see if Zidane had changed from his childish, folding arms pose behind him. Except from his flowing hair and tail, the teenager hadn't budged from his initial pose since their departure from Alexandria. With that kiddy frown and sulk on his face, it made Kuja wonder if being sixteen was truly a qualification to adulthood as the Gaians had set.

They'll have to think of the Princess's Eidolons later. Kuja knew Princess Garnet's situation in the Evil Forest with the Tantalus crew was the reason

for Zidane’s current bad mood, but he had no time for emotional drama. For now, they were called to check on their new improved Black Mages production in the Dali factory.

And speaking of improved, the brothers were told by the twin jesters, Zorn and Thorn, who were overseeing the puppet mages production, that their latest, more powerful Black Mages were ready. These special mages were provided with a bigger potential for magic and a limited free will that would allow them to follow orders without having to be too literal with them, unlike other regular Black Mages. They possessed wings and were capable of flight. They were more brilliant, bigger and scarier than anything. The jesters called their three special creations Black Waltzes.

Yet, to Kuja, these Black Waltzes were to the Black Mages just as the Angels of Death were to the Genomes.

The sight of them disgusted him.

How he wished to toss them in the nearest abyss to never see them again. That would teach these jesters to use his own blueprints to create greater, yet uglier monstrosities.

As Kuja appeared to be the only Tailed Brother who took some interest into these grotesque creatures, Zorn exclaimed to him, “These more intelligent puppets won’t need literal orders to kill!”

Thorn said after his twin, “Brighter, they are!”

“And they will kill using thoughts and strategies!”

“Thoughts and strategies, they will use!”

To their disappointment, Kuja’s interest for these Black Waltzes plummeted. After giving a rather mocking chuckle, he began, “Pray tell, what exactly can your Black Waltzes do more than regular Black Mages? Killing and following orders were exactly what I had in mind for these soulless dolls.”

Uncertain of what to say to please the nobleman, the jesters glared at each other before Zorn bounced with an idea in mind. “They can find the Princess!”

“Find the Princess, they will!” Thorn exclaimed with another bounce.

“Really, now,” Kuja responded like he was in deep thoughts, amused by their lack of courage to admit their creations were nothing but uglier puppets. “Then I am certain this will not be a

problem for you to order one of your Waltzes to find the lost Princess and prove their value, right now. Make them worthy of the effort of producing them."

And with that, their oldest Black Waltz was sent to capture the Princess. To be certain that everything will go perfectly with their creation, the twin jesters decided it was wiser to check on it and they followed it with their Mist-powered airplane.

"You think that Black Waltz will get Garnet?" Zidane broke his quiet boredom, leaning against a wall with his arms folded, having waited for Kuja to be done with the royal jesters.

"To be honest, I doubt it," Kuja responded, smiling at the prospect of the jesters' creature's eventual failure. "Zorn and Thorn might be decent mages, but they never think through. Their Black Waltzes are provided too much powers and free will. This will eventually go against them. They are nothing but failed prototypes."

Failed prototypes, just like *himself*…

"I guess I should go check on them, then," Zidane asserted. He was ready to turn his back against Kuja with a decisive stance to find the

Princess. Oddly enough, Kuja didn’t seem to fight against his decision this time.

“Head to the Ice Cavern, close to the South Gate,” Kuja revealed. “If they are to succeed to escape the dreaded Evil Forest unscathed, their only path to the grounds above the Mist is to venture through the cavern.”

Having Mahila would have been so convenient right now. She probably was soaring in some nearby woods to catch more preys and even bigger predators for the heck of it. After all, Silver Dragons were known to play (or rather, torture) with their preys until death ensued for them, out of instincts. It was something Kuja had told him once, a dragon game that served to perfect their hunting skills and their efficient killing methods. She must be having fun right now.

Well, Zidane will have to venture to the cave alone by foot.

This had never been a problem to him, though. Most Humans were unable to run for long distances, and according to Kuja, Genomes were designed similarly to Humans and the ancient Terrans. One of

the more convenient physical assets in Humans was their immense endurance to run long distance. Hypothetically speaking, for a Human to achieve such a feat, they'd need to practice all the time through their lives. Thankfully, Zidane seemed to be part of those who kept their self-training at heart. After running about half-hour, he discovered, at last, the jesters' rustic airplane docked near a frozen cave.

So, this was the Ice Cavern.

Words from the locals told of this area where very few dared to explore. Some explorers even lost their lives here, but from the few who had survived the ordeal of this wild cavern, a legend was born. The legend spoke of mystic spirit monsters made from the Mist that begged any passerby to be gone or they'll find death, just like the annihilated explorers.

As if the legends scared him.

The gust from the cavern entrance froze his spine through the tip of his tail. Shivering from the cold, Zidane cursed how he should have brought more clothes to cover himself.

If only running back to Dali to get more clothes was a viable option, he'd turn back. However, some echoing noises stole his attention. He ventured deeper from the entrance, where all walls were decorated with natural frozen sculptures, with a path leading to an underground. To his shock, one of the things he sought for was mere meters below him.

Zorn and Thorn.

From above, Zidane spied on the jesters who, in turn, were observing their bigger winged Black Waltz causing this havoc of a blizzard. Yet, what seemed more shocking was to spot that Tantalus young man with stitches on his face and body, the same one disguised as a knight earlier, taking on that Black Waltz and another fearful monster, all by himself.

In a flash, the young man granted the Black Waltz the finishing blow that will seal its fate as well as the monster's.

Such impressive skills… That Human knew how to fight. That was no ordinary Gaian commoner.

While the Black Waltz faded to its death after such a short life, the unnatural blizzard stopped and the ice below Zidane's feet melted into a warm

stream that fell into a majestic waterfall. As he bounced off the stream to land to the side, spring flowers began to come back to life as the temperature rose, much to his comfort, and yet it still was cold enough for him to keep shivering. With the cave returning to its natural form, there were remnants of ice all around, to his displeasure. Well, they didn't call this place the Ice Cavern for nothing.

If that Tantalus young man was here, then there were bigger chances for the Princess to be nearby!

He was going to jump to the below grounds until he was met by the jesters who were about to leave the place. Zorn and Thorn were startled by Zidane's sudden presence in this unlikely meeting, and from the frown on the Monkey Boy's face, the twins were certain to get scolded in a way or another.

"So, this was your super powerful Black Waltz?" Zidane teased the jester with his cocky smile and folding arms. "Was it really defeated by one puny Human?"

Trembling with fear, the jesters stared at each other before they decided on their excuses together. Zorn cried out of terror, "It was the first prototype!"

“Weaker, it is, of course!” Thorn shrieked after his twin.

“I don’t care what your excuses are,” Zidane hissed as he unsheathed his daggers at them, prompting another yelp from them as they hugged each other. “Your Black Waltz has failed, and so, you’ve failed too. You don’t even deserve to live after that gigantic failure.”

Sweating bullets, the twins exclaimed at the same time, “B-But the Black Mages were your brother’s idea!”

“The Black Waltzes were YOUR idea!” the tailed boy snarled at them, now readier than ever to shred these clowns into mere fleshes.

“N-N-Nononono!” the jesters stuttered in sync with a step backward. “L-Lord Kuja n-needs us f-for the extraction!”

This was a true fact.

The Eidolons extraction process needed two prominent mages. Finding two mages on this continent was no problem. The main problem remained the aspect that it might be near impossible to find two mages willing to proceed with the extraction, especially if it will hurt their adored

Princess. Queen Brahne was right to name these two jesters for this tedious task.

Or rather, one separated in two…

Relieved to see the Monkey Boy giving up his attacking stance to retreat one step back, the jester sighed with their fear vanishing. After bowing several times before the teenager for their failure, they continuously stuttered nonsenses about not failing next time and that they will do better.

“Yeah, whatever,” Zidane told them as they took off. He seemed rather amused to watch as they ran away so fast. He had never been in good terms with these annoying twins, after all.

For now, he had a more important matter at hands. He will have to follow that Tantalus young man and find the Princess. When he descended deeper into the caves, he discovered how colder it was getting. Perhaps it was wiser to make a quick exit and wait for the group to reach the entrance where he will be able to deal with them without having the freezing temperatures to bother him.

But as he was about to make his way to the exit, a call interrupted him from behind.

“Zidane!”

He turned around, but seeing nothing but endless ice, he stared down below, where he was able to spot a part of the group that had gone missing during that chaotic mess in Alexandria's castle.

That Tantalus young man again, Captain Steiner, the Black Mage prototype they had lost months ago and… Princess Garnet from who the call came…

What an odd group…

"Garnet?" Zidane called back, making himself shocked to see her. However, his presence raised more suspicion among the group who appeared to look at him with a careful eye, with the Princess alone to give him a caring look. Even from distance, Zidane could see the frown Steiner was offering him upon having called the Princess by her first name. Of course, as with all the other times, the Princess did not flinch at her name. At least, Zidane was grateful she was doing okay…

The tailed teenager hopped from ground to ground until he reached the group that was climbing at a slower pace. Careful to not let her harm, Steiner immediately stood between Zidane and the Princess. Even after these years, the Pluto Knights Captain still never trusted this boy nor his brother. "Z-

Zidane, what are you doing here?" Garnet asked. She appeared nervous despite her present allies.

"I should ask you the same," Zidane told her, using his worried, innocent expression. He was about to request Steiner to step aside but the Tantalus young man came before the group, stopping the boy from taking another step.

"Were you the one who's sent that big ass monster to attack us earlier?!" the young man snarled with his sword out. Suddenly, everyone set their eyes at him, all clueless.

Taken aback, Zidane frowned and gave the young man a glare. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Blank, please stop!" Garnet begged the young man by lowering the sword he'd been holding up to the blond boy. So, that Tantalus guy went by the name of Blank. What an odd name. The Princess turned at her tailed friend and approached him. "Zidane, I'm… We're heading to Lindblum."

The revelation shocked her friend. "What? Why?" Zidane questioned her, eyes wide.

"It's…" the Princess began before swallowing with a discomforting gulp. She was uncertain how

much she had to reveal, considering that she suspected Kuja to be behind her mother's madness. "… it's complicated. I need to head there and these men are my escorts."

"Your mother misses you," Zidane commented, still keeping up with his worried self. This was all a façade, unbeknown to her. "You need to come back to Alexandria. We have a cargo ship ready for your arrival."

At the reveal, Steiner's face suddenly lit up with approval. "Princess!" he exclaimed with a wide smile. 'Even your ruffian friend Zidane has more common sense than this foolish thief!' The knight pointed at Blank who rolled his eyes at him with a long grunt and sigh. Both men were probably not in good terms. "Let's go back to your dear Queen mother!"

"She can't return!" Blank pushed the knight away like he'd been in a challenge, which Steiner replied with another push. "You know why! How can you be so blind to your Queen's madness?"

"Blank is right," Garnet admitted, looking distressed to the side like she prayed for a miracle to come and solve their issue. The little Black Mage prototype looked at her, seemingly confused by

everything. “We’re not returning to Alexandria. I need to meet with Uncle Cid.”

“Please, Princess Garnet,” Zidane pled and still went with his worried act. “It’s for your own good.”

There, the most suspicious act that had come out from the devil’s mouth. Zidane had just called her Princess Garnet. This was something he had never done so in their seven years of knowing each other, and that detail alone raised more suspicion about the tailed boy’ behavior.

Having gotten more anxious from her old friend’s acting, she retreated behind Captain Steiner before she added with certainty in her tone, “I’m not coming back.”

“Is… that so?” the tailed young man said, his voice suddenly turning cold.

Then the unexpected occurred, causing Garnet to let a shocking gasp out and pulling everyone to take a step back with another careful glare over the tailed boy. Something about him had changed drastically, a skeleton out of the closet to reveal the true self of the bratty child. His aura was different from the care he had offered to the Princess since the beginning of their meeting.

Zidane's glare shot a cold darkness and his lips pulled out a mischievous grin of a mad man. Between his skillful fingers, his two daggers danced in a flawless circle. As everyone took steps back, Zidane stepped forward, shooting the coldest stare of a criminal wanting to relish the bloodied death of others. Just like a true Angel of Death, the same one that had massacred these two vile men who had made a futile attempt at capturing the Princess, six years ago. The feral, killing boy was back.

After a weak, mad chuckle, Zidane declared, "If Garnet's not coming with me, then I'll have to dispose of you all but the Princess. I'll take you back home by force, and you won't be able to stop me."

Outwardly less fearful than the others by the tailed young man's sudden change of behavior, Blank protested, "What? Even killing your knight friend who agrees with you?"

"Zidane…?" Garnet tried to pull Zidane away from his sudden madness by keeping her caring tone. "What has gotten you?"

But he didn't wait for another word nor any action from the Gaian group. His dagger ready, he left no chance for them to rebut and he unleashed an attack, starting with the small, nearly forgotten

Black Mage prototype. The tiny creature screamed and covered himself with his staff as he was completely unprepared, but he was quickly shielded by the armored knight Steiner who took all the blow in a loud metallic clash. Furious to have missed the tiny mage, Zidane bounced back with a snarl, ready to stab into each non-armored parts of the Knights Captain.

As a last resort, the Black Mage focused with a short prayer and from the palm of his hands, a sphere of flame formed before he shot a blast of Fire at Zidane, which hit the tailed boy at full speed. The recoil of the explosive blast propelled Zidane few meters away from the group, but he was immediately back on his feet, back to his usual attacking stance. This time, Zidane turned to the Tantalus young man, wanting to make a skewer of him with his long daggers. Blank stopped each swing of the daggers with his sword before their blades met. They pushed each other around, but for an instant, Blank had the higher ground with his heavier weight and he pushed the tailed boy in a violent rush, causing Zidane to lose balance. Blank took this opportunity to unleash a sword attack, which left a cut on Zidane’s arm.

With a cry of pain, Zidane pulled himself out of the battle for few seconds to hold onto his newest injury. Wincing with ache, he growled at the group with a sudden rush pushing him to attack them again as if the wound was actually giving him a spur of energy. The wound had become nothing but a mere scratch. He readied his daggers again but instead of using them, he launched himself high in the air to land straight to Blank's face in a powerful kick on the skull, incapacitating him completely from the fight.

As the battle raged on, Garnet felt helpless like she could do nothing but watch everything in distress. Her tears began to swell her orbits and blur her vision as her old friend fought her companions. She couldn't simply stand here watching everyone fight for her life. The scene brought out the anxiety and distress from her so much that she couldn't even evoke a simple Cure spell at them. She froze on place, crying.

Soon, her distress intensified when her three companions were now all stumped on the ground, unable to battle or even stand back with their inflicted injuries, all by one single man. Only her and a slightly bruised Zidane were still standing and only few meters distanced each from the other. Now

all vulnerable and weak, Garnet had just made herself all available to be taken back to Alexandria.

Even with her fallen companions, Zidane's core still emitted that same dark, mad aura that made him a ruthless fighter and killer. With the same twisted smile and cold eyes, the tailed boy ordered, "You're coming to Alexandria."

No, had they lost this fight already? Was her mother lost forever now? She will no longer have any more occasion to escape from the Queen! This couldn't end here! She had to seek Uncle Cid's help to smack some senses back to her mother and heal her heart!

"I'm not coming back!" Garnet screamed in tears at her old friend before she shut her lids, letting her instincts do the rest.

And without thinking, just before Zidane was able to reach for her arms, she hollered…

"MEGA FLARE!"

Mega… Flare… Why were these words giving him such a familiar experience, like a déjà-vu moment? As everyone around vanished into nothingness, only his self and the void remained. Losing his balance in this strange emptiness, he

dropped on his knees and his ankle hit the solid ground. He screamed from the painful sprain which prevented him from getting back on his feet.

Looking around fast, wondering what was about to happen, an earthquake grounded stronger and a sudden wide mound formed below. It gained height and rose higher until the ground shattered into an explosive blast.

A gigantic, dark creature emerged from the ground, soaring high in the sky with a blaring roar resounding miles and miles around. The flying legend spread its wings, ready to fight its foe.

A dark, giant dragon. Bahamut…

Old thoughts of his past flashed back before his eyes.

The market, the bitten pear, the pursuing Summoners, their escape, Mahila, Kuja… the big, evil dragon.

Stuck on the ground, Zidane froze, his wide, fearful eyes never leaving the great dragon. The very being he had dreaded from his childhood came back to life. The young man felt the growing immense power from it, a power radiating a greater strength than the one he had faced years ago. Unable to

escape with his sprain, he could only watch in distress as Bahamut collected its energy to its mouth, ready to shoot a killing beam at him.

And suddenly, from the corner of his eyes, he saw a glimpse of her, his dear crush, Garnet, ordering the dragon to attack her friend with… a soft song. Her beautiful chant, ruined by the roar of the legendary dragon that had started to shoot a wide, blinding beam, straight to the tailed teenager.

Zidane screamed, his body engulfed and prisoner of the blazing beam. His cries deafened by the rising sound of the blast, his throat soon lost its voice as it dried up completely. The unbearable pain spreading deeper and deeper beneath his skin, even his thoughts were now lost in a sea of intense pressure to the body, where all the pleasant and relieving memories that could help him lessen his suffering were gone. All left was the pain of this unavoidable attack and his despair.

The despair of having been betrayed.

After what seemed like an unbearable eternity, the beam stopped, the dragon vanished and the surrounding environment radiated light once again, revealing the Princess and her companions in the Ice Cavern. After having summoned her most powerful

Eidolon out of distress and fear to lose her friends, Garnet felt drained of her endurance and stamina. The summoning session had exhausted most of her spiritual powers but enough remained to allow her to restore her companions to give them back the strength to stand again.

Careful about what was to come next, Garnet came to inspect their attacker. On her way to him, she couldn’t help but shed some tears. Her attention fully drawn to her old tailed friend, she came forward slowly and she got a closer look at him.

The injured, exhausted tailed boy lied heavy on his stomach, his breathing getting harder to come by. The blood stained around his entire attire and torn clothes, with parts of his flesh even visible underneath. His consciousness followed him like a clinging parasite, punishing him with an ever-growing pain. Staring straight into her teenage friend’s eyes with warmth and regrets, Garnet suddenly found herself with a bigger fear instead.

Zidane shot a weak, frozen glare at her. From the tiny gap of his mouth, she saw his baring teeth as a low growl slipped from his lips.

In spite of his injuries and his suffering, all Zidane could think was betrayal. The Princess had

just attempted to dispose of him for good.

Garnet had seen it, the fear on the usually fearless boy as soon as he met with Bahamut.

Kneeling over his wounded body, Garnet whispered, “I-I apologize, Zidane… I didn’t wish for us to come to this… I thought… that you could have put up some fight against my Eidolon… I didn’t want to hurt you, but… I cannot… return to Alexandria…”

Too weak to even nod, Zidane let his pain bring him further to unconsciousness which he did not fight against. The slumber will allow him a peace of mind. He did not wish to see and hear the Princess anymore.

Kuja was right all along.

Garnet hated him.

When the day was about to end, it was time for Kuja to notice Zidane’s extraordinarily long absence since he had left to the Ice Cavern. The bratty boy must had gotten lost by some distraction, thus drifting away from his original goal to find the Princess. Knowing his brother’s strength and

extreme aptitude to survive the greatest dangers, Kuja was still confident Zidane will come back soon.

But his attention was taken away when he heard some workers from his underground factory gossiping about an odd group of strangers who were accompanied by a tiny Black Mage. The nobleman did not remember having created other tiny Black Mages than his first prototype who he recalled having seen during Princess Garnet's sixteenth birthday celebration. The creature he thought as lost a second time among the Tantalus crew was back in the village with an "odd group", which Kuja assumed to be the Princess and some companions from the sunken airship.

If they were in the village of Dali, then Zidane might be truly lost somewhere if his brother couldn't have stopped them on his way. After all, the path between Dali and the Ice Cavern was a straight line, and Zidane should have crossed with the group. Perhaps, with his eternally distracted mind, he might simply have missed them on his way.

"***Zidane, come back. The Princess's here in Dali.***"

Kuja waited for an answer, but he was getting silence instead. With the years growing and acquiring knowledge together, both brothers learned that whenever one did not respond to each other's telepathic call, that meant a pending doom for the other.

Oh no, not again. Hopefully, that story from eight years ago was not happening again. If Zidane had dared to get himself kidnapped once more… What a brat!

Thankfully, Mahila was just around the corner, or rather, close by the village, hidden in a patch of woods and ready to eat another delicious fresh prey. However, Kuja had no time for food. Together, they flied straight to the Ice Cavern, hoping they'll find some trace of Zidane's presence somewhere. As the Silver Dragon waited for the man outside, Kuja ventured deeper in the cavern, suddenly regretting he was not covered enough when the breeze flowed through his exposed skin. Along his shivers and bristling tail, he slowly walked while trying to cover himself with his arms as much as possible.

"Zidane!" he hollered his name, hoping his call will bring the boy back to his attention. Yet, the silence remained supreme.

His steps were getting faster and more nervous, giving him not enough comfort zone and time to enjoy this naturally forged cavern and its luxuriant, cold-resistant vegetation. He cried his brother's name again which was lost into returning echoes, but no returning response. Where was Zidane, dammit? He couldn't have gone too far…

Kuja spotted some clear trace of crumbling mounds and the charred signs of a recent explosion around the area he just came in, beside this natural, clear-crystal lake where the rich waterfall found its end. He stared around, hoping to discover something conclusive that will lead to his brother.

There, something that seemed out of the décor as the odd one… The tip of a blond, furred tail, hiding the rest of its body behind a crumble of rocks and ice…

The young man rushed to the spot, finding the one he'd been searching for long minutes. Zidane lied asleep, or rather, unconscious, on the cold, snowy ground, with bruises and blood covering him.

"Zidane!" Kuja crouched over the unconscious body, distressed by the injuries his brother had sustained. The freezing environment had already turned Zidane's skin to a pale complexion, almost

blue. The up and down movements of his slow breathing were going at the pace of a snail. Kuja shivered as he caught the boy with his arms before he went for a tender, caring caress with his much warmer fingers across Zidane's cold face.

Zidane was still alive, thanks goodness…

How did Zidane come to this result? Was there a fight with someone or a group? How did he get beaten hard with so much bruises and cuts? His younger brother was much better than this! What if he fell down from the higher grounds of the cavern? A mere slip above the cliffs and one might find something much worse than broken bones…

After casting a Curaga spell on his younger sibling, Kuja went to check for a pulse to see if anything seemed out of the ordinary. The pulses were slow but stable. Brighter, livelier colors had returned to Zidane slowly and his bruises were cleaned off his skin thanks to his spell, but his eyes remained shut tight. Kuja gently shook him while drawing his brother's hair away from his face. "Wake up, boy," Kuja hushed to him, chuckling and relieved to see him safe. "You have been asleep long enough. The Princess is safe now, so we can get her together later."

But the brotherly, tender moment soon turned into a worrisome nightmare as Zidane's colors shifted back to the pale, cold complexion like the Curaga spell only gave him a temporary boost of life. His pulses returned to a near death level to the point Kuja found it difficult to feel them anymore. As panic rushed in, the elder sibling shook all across his body, fearing for the imminent doom hovering over his little brother. The time spent unconscious in such a cold environment had been slowly killing him, and he needed to get Zidane out of here, fast!

That reckless brat! Why always running into danger blindly like this? Eventually, he'll get himself killed in the blink of an eye when he'll expect it the less! Why did he always give him scares like this?

How could Garland even call him perfect with such imperfections?

Taking the unconscious, frozen boy to his arms, Kuja rushed to the entrance with steady steps, calling Mahila to take them out of this place fast. If he didn't get Zidane into a warmer area, he was going to be lost forever…

"Please, Zidane, be safe."

***Author's note**: Of course, I have to add some family fluff parts.*

Chapter 16: War

This chapter has some small changes from the in-game events, but I guess that's close enough for the core events to be the same.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 16: War

His opening lids hurt.

Blinded by the bright flames of the fireplace, Zidane squinted his eyes and winced in pain. However, the flames soon turned into a soothing song with the soft crackling noises of the burning wood. As his vision came back to him, he recognized the familiar atmosphere and scent of his manor in Treno. The calming warmth of the firebox provided him a comfort that he wished to keep longer.

How odd, he'd been sleeping on multiple layers of covers on the floor, with more covers wrapping his body. Having been in this warming environment had soaked himself in his own sweat, but strangely, he felt comfortable in this. Lazily, he maintained his

pose, not thinking of anything distracting and just enjoying the moment of peace.

Suddenly, a realization hit him hard.

Wait a second… He wasn't supposed to be home. Just earlier, that incident in the Ice Cavern, the meeting with the Princess's group, Garnet's betrayal and… that accursed Eidolon Bahamut… It all came back to him like a wave of pain.

But then, how was he still alive in the comfort of his home? Was all this a stupid nightmare? No, that was real, for certain. If Bahamut couldn't finish him off, then the freezing snow of the cavern should have…

Who had saved him?

"Hey, Zidane," a voice hushed to him. In spite of the calm voice, the person who had called him sounded rather excited.

This was a tone all too familiar coming from the one he recognized as his sibling. With his sore muscles and weak bones right now, Zidane turned around slowly to the voice and offered his big brother a weak smile. "Kuja, y… you're safe," Zidane whispered to him, only now realizing that his throat was still aching from his incident in the Ice

Cavern. He seemed so content to see Kuja alive that the tip of his tail gently swept up and down like a cat's.

"Why shouldn't I be safe?" Kuja chuckled at his brother's worries. "You were the one who nearly became part of the Mist as a lost soul if I have not discovered you in the Ice Cavern in time."

Kuja had saved him from another slow, silly death. So, this was what had happened during his unconsciousness. Zidane gulped at the frightening idea of never being able to open his eyes again to see this day. After he managed to sit back on his rear with the help of his brother, the blond young man ended with a "Thank you, Kuja".

After he was offered a hot herbal tea from Kuja, Zidane became lost in thoughts, pondering what should happen next after that incident with Garnet's group. From the look of it, Kuja seemed to have no idea what had occurred, and it might better stay that way. The stress of this event brought him a fit of sudden coughs he could not stop, like he'd been sick for a while. "You should rest here for another day or two," Kuja suggested while giving Zidane more rubs on his back after the coughing session. After Zidane's throat felt more relieved with the herbal

tea, Kuja sat before him. “Tell me what happened in the Ice Cavern.”

No, Kuja must not know about Garnet’s attack on him. If he learned that she had used an Eidolon to fight him, Kuja might never forgive him as this was a foolish move from Zidane’s part. “There was slippery ice. I just slipped on it and I fell down to the grounds below, meters away from the top. I forgot the rest, so I guess I lost consciousness when I hit the ground. I know it was dumb, but that’s ice for you.”

Well, it came out silly, but from the stern expression on Kuja, he seemed to believe the lie. “Did you meet the Princess on your way?”

“Nan, I didn’t,” Zidane said with certainty and quickness, strengthening his act that Kuja still believed. “I don’t know. She might still be lost in the Evil Forest… Or if she got out, she might have not seen me unconscious, or I just missed her on my way to the Ice Cavern. We… We probably lost her now…” His head low with a faint sadness, Zidane was surprised to see that Kuja didn’t seem worried of the straying Princess information.

“Don’t worry about the Princess,” Kuja reassured him, his lips curled up. “She has been spotted in

Dali with more people and she seemed to be on her way to Lindblum. I assume she's seeking help from the regent. She's safer than you think."

"Oh…" The blond made himself appear more relieved as he gave away a sigh and then a small smile. "That's good to know."

Needing more action, the teenager was about to bounce from his spot until more accidental coughs put an end to his enthusiasm. Despite the warm room and his sweat, his skin felt cold. Calmly, Kuja laid a hand on his shoulder. "You are still weak and sick," the older brother revealed. "Like I told you, rest here a little longer. After all, you were out for five entire days, and I don't think you can do much at this point."

Five days, that was quite a lot, and yet, this didn't seem to stop Zidane from being excited. "Five… entire days?" the younger man whispered before another cough came out. "Kuja, I've had worse before. I'll be fine."

"Perhaps, but you'll get yourself on feet faster if you rest here."

After coughing few more times, Zidane had no choice but to admit Kuja was right over his health.

Folding his arms in a half-protest, he sighed and exclaimed, “Okay, fine, I’ll stay here, but you better bring me food. I’m starving.”

“Stop acting like a brat,” Kuja responded with a laugh. “I didn’t mean you to stay on this spot forever. I meant you should be confined within home. Walk wherever you want within the manor’s walls; I have no care. Just don’t get out.”

“Hey, I was being serious!”

Serious or not, Zidane’s shenanigans allowed them to share laughter and joy in this brotherly moment. The warmth provided by the flames of the firebox was not enough to lighten the mood. Rather, it was how closer he felt with Kuja right now. They hadn’t had these family instants for some times ever since Kuja’s plan to get closer to the Alexandrian royal court had begun, and now, he wished for this happy moment to last longer. Zidane was thrilled by these thoughts, remembering all his childhood instants when Kuja would soften around him, where they’d hug and cuddle for comfort. For as long as he remembered, since Kuja had started to become too busy to pay attention to his brother to focus on the Queen instead, loneliness had become a greater part of his life.

A darker prospect rushed, all of a sudden, prompting him to loosen his grin into a weaker smile. He realized that a fear far greater than the invincible Eidolons or losing a battle permanently loomed over him. Since Princess Garnet's had betrayed him, if Mahila ever became a fully feral Silver Dragon lost with her species and if Kuja was to vanish…

His only true fear…

He'll be alone.

"Don't do anything reckless," Kuja added as he stood up and walked to the door. "The war against Burmecia is about to begin. I'm going to Alexandria with Mahila to check on the preparations of the Queen's armada and the Black Mages."

And with this, Kuja was gone.

Well, without his brother for a long while and without Mahila to play with and hunt for some monsters outside town, Zidane was sure to get bored fast, being confined at home. Uncertain of what to do to spend time, he walked around the manor, giving cold stares at whoever he crossed path with, whether they were servants or the Auction house customers below the balcony of their manor. Most of

the servants beamed at him with a bow and offered him words on how happy they were to see him back after that nasty adventure in the Ice Cavern. However, Zidane had learned over the time that these words were all but senseless compliments because they were servants of the Tribal house. Being polite with their masters was part of their job, after all.

And speaking of the servants, he could always spend some time playing games of Tetra Master. Yet, truth be told, the game itself had been more like a hobby than a passion to the contrary of people's beliefs. Yes, he had won tournaments in the past and bested some of the best players on the Mist Continent, but this was where it stopped; he was an expert, not a fanatic. After all, long games and competitions bored him fast with his easily distracted mind.

Perhaps he should turn to art and find some papers and pen, as others seemed to praise his artistic skills, including his own brother, though Zidane did not consider himself an artist to the level of famous painters of Gaia. He recognized drawing might be fun, but only when inspiration struck, which did not happen too often. Forcing himself to stare at a blank paper did not trigger the inspiration

either, and at this point, with boredom taking over, he'd rather go read one of these long poetry books Kuja prized so much.

Nan, even that was too boring for his tastes. The only books he'd crave for where those with adventurous heroes, but he had read all of those available in the manor already.

After few hours of wandering and coughing around the manor, he simply couldn't stand still anymore. He was a Genome, dammit! A Genome was made studier than any of these Gaians! Whatever Kuja said about his weaker stance, Zidane will not die if he went out! He'll just have to cover himself a little more than he had done so during his Ice Cavern incident, and then he was set for another adventure outside Treno.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind.

Alexandria… Princess Garnet…

What if Garnet had returned to Alexandria by now? Zidane had tried to kill Captain Steiner, one of the two most respected officers of the royal family. Attacking Steiner had made himself an enemy to Alexandria. If the knight and the Princess told the

Queen about this, then they might see Kuja as their enemy now!

And if Garnet faced Kuja in a rage, she might order her Eidolons to fight against him!

No! He could not let this happen to him!

"***Kuja? Please, be careful in Alexandria!***" Zidane shouted in their connected minds.

Instead of the worries he had expected, Zidane was granted the usual chuckle from Kuja. "***Careful? Zidane, don't worry. I will not take part of this unannounced war.***"

"***What? For real?***"

"***Of course, I'm not risking my life over this frivolous war.***"

"***I'm worried about you.***"

"***Don't be.***"

"***But… I can't help it… Garnet… She was the one who knocked me down!***"

There was a longer silence. Zidane gulped, having realized about the unintentional slip of the tongue. Like he was cornered, he was expecting

some nasty scold from Kuja for his huge lie this morning.

"***Why did she knock you down?***" Kuja finally asked, and Zidane felt the rising anger from his sibling.

But Zidane had to tell him the truth if he wanted to protect Kuja from danger. "***I… attacked her friends and Rusty…***"

Kuja's anger was now turning into a rage. "***Why did you lie to me about the Ice Cavern?!***"

"***I… I don't…***"

"***Why did you attack them? Why would you do such a stupid thing?!***"

Even without Kuja physically present to see him, Zidane lowered his head in guilt. "***I… had no choice… Or rather, I was dumb, I know! We met in the Ice Cavern and Garnet didn't want to come with me to Alexandria! And… suddenly, I just got furious… and I just couldn't stand them anymore… I attacked them, but then… B-Bahamut appeared…***"

"***W-What? She used an Eidolon?!***"

"***Yeah…***"

“***Dammit, Zidane.***”

“***I know… she was desperate… I’m sorry…***”

There was another long silence, and this time, after waiting for another five minutes, Kuja didn’t seem near to bother with another reply. If the Queen knew of Zidane’s actions on the Princess, it might become a problem for Kuja. All Zidane hoped was the Queen to remain oblivious to that stupid incident that might cost his brother’s life, if it ever came to light. He hoped Garnet still was not coming back to Alexandria, after all.

All these negative ideas affected his mood, exhausting his mind to the point he knocked himself into a deep sleep after a quick snack from the kitchen. When he woke up, he looked at the time to discover it was the morning of the next day already.

He should take the habit to shorten his sleeps…

“***Kuja? You’re okay?***” Zidane called his brother in their links, hoping to get an answer after Kuja might have calmed down by then.

However, the reply never came. Panic started to wave through. He shouldn’t lose too much time. He had to get back to Alexandria and find his brother, fast!

If they ever hurt Kuja… They'll pay…

Hitching a ride to Alexandria hadn't been the easiest when he couldn't use the hidden Hilda Garde as there was a search warrant on the airship. Instead, thanks to his stealth, he was able to sneak into another noble's airship without being seen and he succeeded to reach Alexandria on the same day. For the time being, he had tried reaching Kuja several times but without success. Had something happened to him, or was he deliberately ignoring him after that rage against his little brother? Zidane couldn't tell, but he knew he had to get there as soon as possible.

The only way to reach the castle was to cross a lake and Mahila was nowhere to be seen. At this point, to get to the castle, this no longer was a question about stealth, but endurance. He might be a great runner, but he had never been a good swimmer. He could do the same as usual, friendly charming a soldier to use the ferry and cross the lake as easily. After all, even as Kuja's brother, Zidane still was not part of the Queen's special guests list as he was no use to Her Majesty.

And he recognized the soldier assigned to the ferry today. Despite all the charms he had used on her in the past, this one took her guarding job too seriously.

Well, he got to try. He took few steps forward the soldier who was standing on the ferry, seemingly bored. Zidane's presence alarmed her for an instant but she took hold of herself to remain quiet. "Hey, can I get to the other side?" Zidane asked her, looking dumb, yet innocent.

"Only allowed members from the Queen's list can cross the lake!" she announced with a tap of her spear.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Zidane pouted at the soldier with some taps of the foot. "But you know who I am, anyway, so can you make an exception?!"

"No exception!" she shouted back.

"C'mon!" the teenager insisted, annoyed by her persistence. "My brother's there with the Queen! And I need to meet him!"

"I can't let you in!"

Frustrated, he was about to growl at her, but a faint roar far in the sky above bought him back to

calm. By judging the soldier’s expression, she didn’t seem to have heard it, but Zidane certainly recognized that roar.

Mahila was not too far away. He stared above, and the dragon looked back. Whenever they did this together, the beast would come down to a nearby wood, out of the town.

Content to see her, he dashed outside the city, following the Silver Dragon’s trajectory from the ground until they both reached a haven in the woods where they met, both being now far from curious sights. After all, since the death of King Alexander, all kinds of dragons roaming around Alexandria were unfairly massacred. Mahila was fortunate enough that her fur and scales reflected the light well, making her harder to be spotted in the sky from the grounds. When both dragon and Genome met, Mahila emitted a gentle purr before she rested her muzzle on Zidane’s shoulder. Happy to feel her touch, Zidane cuddled with her face and poked each other’s nose. The boy smiled before he said, “Hey, hitch me a ride to the castle, alright?”

It didn’t take long before they crossed the lake from above and they landed on a castle top discreetly, all away from spying eyes of the soldiers

and other servants. When Mahila flied away, Zidane ran on the roof to find his brother's private quarters. From where he stood, he could see the quarters with the open window and he thought about how he will intrude himself in there. Hanging above the window with his tail curled around a flag pole, the relief took over when he spotted his brother sitting by the bed, reading a book and his back facing the window.

Thank goodness, Kuja was okay.

Well, he might as well give Kuja a little scare with a shocking entrance to the room. Zidane readied himself by landing subtly inside the window, trying to make himself as silent as possible.

"Zidane, I know you're here."

Kuja's call had shocked him more than Zidane had ever managed. With a sudden loud shriek that caused him to drop on the floor in an awkward bump, Zidane dusted himself from the ground as Kuja gently laughed at the younger one's misfortune.

And to add more bad luck, the shock brought back the rough coughing from his ill throat. "I told you to rest," Kuja commented, abandoning his book aside to look at his sibling, amused by the sight.

“You’re so incorrigible, but I guess that’s just how you are. It can’t be helped.”

Along his incessant coughing, Zidane began to protest. “You wouldn’t answer my calls, dammit! I was worried about you, so I had to come and check if you were still okay!”

The older Genome shot a glare at him before his facial features softened. “I was furious,” he admitted with his smile still on. “I did expect you to come here regardless, but I didn’t think you’d go as far as coming here by foot.”

“I sneaked into an airship heading here, that’s how.”

“Oh. And I supposed you charmed a soldier to cross the lake?”

“Mahila was around.”

Helping himself with another laugh, Kuja stared above, keeping up with a solemn expression. The mage began, “Well, nevertheless, we’re Genomes. We’re created sturdier than these Gaians. You’re certainly going to be fine.” After a short pause, his face formed into a determined frown with a smile that indicated a new genius idea in mind. “You just came in time. The Queen’s fleet is about to take off

to attack Burmecia with her new army of Black Mages. Soon, we shall see the efficiency of your soulless puppets."

Surprised by Kuja's comment, Zidane blinked at him. "My puppets?" the boy questioned his brother's choice of words. "You were the one who had spent years planning and conceiving them."

After giving in to more chuckles, Kuja stood back, passing by Zidane as he offered him some quick, yet affectionate brushes to the cheeks with his slender, delicate fingers. "You were the one who gifted me with the concept," the silver-haired man hushed with some pride in his tone. "The credit is yours as it is mine."

Confused, Zidane scratched his head, having no memory of ever shoving that idea to his brother. It might be one of these one-shot childish, dumb comments any bratty boy uttered during embarrassing moments of their childhood. "Geez, thanks," the younger Genome said with a stretch of the body before another awkward cough interrupted his stretching move. "You said I came in time for the Burmecia attack. I hope you're not intending to go. You said earlier you weren't going to risk your life."

“I am astounded that you even remember what I said back home,” Kuja commented with a gentle, yet teasing smile and tone, but Zidane had not flinched at it. “I am going, but I will not partake in the actual heat of the war. I will observe the scene from afar. But now that you’re here, perhaps you shall come and admire the fruit of our efforts together. And if we ever have to fight, I am trusting our combined efforts will have no problem to get rid of these rats.”

Eager for action, Zidane bounced into his excited stance with a grin on his face. “Sure, I’ll be coming!”

“Oh, so you brought my dear girl’s monkey boyfriend with you?”

“Your Majesty, your quick assumptions as to brand my younger brother as the Princess’s boyfriend will grant him a blush to his cheeks.”

A blush, indeed. Zidane couldn’t hide his reddened cheeks at their senseless discussion. He tried containing himself but his appendage gave him away as the tip of his tail began to shake continuously. Queen Brahne and Kuja giggled together at the boy’s embarrassment. The woman

added, “Well, is that so, he will make a fine addition to this war. I believe with the Tailed Brothers on our sides, we will crush all these street rats before they can even retreat in their holes!”

The prospect of fighting in this war with Kuja sounded rather pleasant to Zidane’s ears. He knew their potentials were such they should have no problem fighting ten skilled Gaians at the same time, if they remained together. As the brothers boarded the airship, the Queen remained on the ground for longer, admiring her other ships from her splendid armada, with her soldiers and Black Mages alike boarded like puppets ready to shed blood. The thought of this unannounced war brought a cathartic grin over her, now readier than ever to make Alexandria the biggest and most powerful nation on the Mist Continent.

Oh, she couldn’t wait to conquer more lands.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a call behind her. “Your Majesty, may I have a word?”

Queen Brahne turned around to face her most trustworthy general, Beatrix, who appeared to have a worried look in her determined eyes. “Beatrix, you know how rude it is to speak on my back,” the

Queen commented with a humph. “What do you wish to speak about?”

The General sighed. Ever since her Queen had made that tailed noble her personal advisor, her endeavor with her infantry had changed for the worse, as if Kuja was the only person that mattered to her. Still, Beatrix was not afraid of her Queen’s reaction for whatever will come and she revealed, “I do not think it is wise to bring the Tailed Brothers with us in this war. My soldiers had seen them fight. They might be very powerful, but they are very unpredictable.”

“Powerful?” Brahne focused on the word and her smile broadened. “Power is what I seek, my dear Beatrix.”

This was the insanity in her Queen which the General had seen growing over the years. This was almost unbearable to have to watch her gentle Queen’s descent to madness. Yet, Beatrix was nothing but a shadow of the royal family. She might have no power over the Queen, but she still could try to bring her back some senses. “Why fighting against Burmecia? Do they really wish to steal the kingdom of Alexandria?”

“Of course!” was Brahne’s immediate answer. “Why do you think I’m initiating this war? Haven’t you heard about what had happened to the Burmecian prince himself? He fled his kingdom from the grip of his corrupted father who only wishes to gain the higher grounds of the continent!”

Blinking at her Queen in silence, Beatrix wished to push the discussion further. She wanted a true answer. “This is nothing but a rumor, Your Majesty. We should p—”

“Are you questioning your loyalty to Alexandria, General Beatrix?”

General Beatrix froze, the twisted, cold tone of her Queen looming dread over her. She couldn’t believe how her former lovely, kind Queen Brahne had fallen into a world of delusions and hunger of power, all since the death of their King. And when the Tailed Brothers came to their lives, everything had gone downhill since then. Beatrix might have sworn allegiance to the royal family years ago, but this was a different family back then. This was when both the Queen and the King were alive together and desiring peace and prosperity over their country and even the whole continent.

Unfortunately, this Queen standing before her was the same Queen to whom she had sworn to protect with all her might and life. For this, like a pawn in a game of chess, Beatrix had to obey.

“No, Your Majesty,” Beatrix said, her words away from the truth of her heart. “I am a servant of Alexandria.”

“Then let’s get going!” the Queen ordered, fatigued of this baseless discussion.

…

“***I don’t like her,***” Zidane told Kuja with their connected links after having spied on the General and the Queen. He couldn’t get his glare away from her that he began to let a growl out of fury. Thankfully, neither the Queen nor the General had noticed his presence.

“***Ha, ha, she doesn’t like us either, from what it seems,***” Kuja added with a sneer. “***I know what you’re thinking, but we should not kill her now, not until the part of this story ends. Well, here they come. Straighten up.***”

The brothers remained side by side on the deck when Queen Brahne and General Beatrix walked by them. Kuja kept on his usual soft smile that Beatrix

really wished she could tear out of his delicate face. Zidane had his arms folded, not looking at anything in particular and just tapping his foot like he was bored. The frozen glare Beatrix shot at them would have scared away all enemies or soldiers under her, but the brothers couldn’t care less of what she thought of them. After all, they were under the Queen’s protection, and even if they were not, they could take on her easily.

Brahne turned to the brothers, greeting them again with her wide grin. “Oh, Kuja, I have a request for you,” she told the older brother.

With a bow, Kuja replied, “Of course, Your Majesty. At your service.”

“I want you to stay in the castle with the jesters, Zorn and Thorn.”

The request had frozen everyone. This all came as a shock. “Pray tell, why the sudden change of decision?” the young man asked, his expression barely changed despite the surprise.

Brahne revealed, “I have heard from our spies that Princess Garnet had been spotted in Treno, and I have my suspicion that she wants to come back to Alexandria using the secret Gargan Roo passage. I

want you to check on the jesters so they won't do anything reckless to her."

"***What?! So now, I'm going to Burmecia alone?***" Zidane protested in his mind.

"***Don't worry,***" Kuja reassured his brother. "***I'll ask Mahila to remain around Burmecia too, in case you need her. Besides, I think it is wiser that I remain here, instead of someone like you. Didn't you mention earlier that you attacked the princess's friends? She might be scared to see you again.***"

"Oh, I am honored you are putting your faith in me for such an imperative task, Your Majesty," Kuja cheered on the Queen, and the woman blushed at his kind words. "I will make sure Princess Garnet will feel safe and make herself at home when she will come back here."

"***But what if Garnet will fight you with Eidolons?! You might die!***" The fear on Zidane's feature was quite visible now, and no one but Kuja understood that sudden fear on him.

… An image of the past flashed.

…

I won't die, and you will not either. They will never know our plan. Princess Garnet will never use Eidolons on us.

But… it still can happen! Maybe she'll know and when she knows why her father died, she'll want revenge! She still can attack you and kill you!

It won't happen. I will not die.

You… You promise me?

I cannot promise anything.

No! You have to promise me you won't die!

Fine, I promise, then.

…

That little, yet big promise Kuja had been forced to make during Zidane's crying, six years ago; it all came back to him now.

The very same event seemed to repeat itself right now, save for the crying part. Kuja could not tell why this meaningless promise lingered in his thoughts to this day as Zidane must have forgotten it by now. It was not surprising, considering the boy forced the promise onto Kuja in the spur of a dramatic moment.

In some way, Zidane's distracted, yet innocent endeavor was more than amusing to the silver-haired Genome. If this truly was how Garland had envisaged Zidane to become…

"***The Princess is not a reckless personage like you,***" Kuja teased his brother. "***I might be your family, but I am one self in my entirety. As I have never attacked her, she will not attack me and she will feel safer with me than you.***"

"***I hope you're right…***" Zidane complained in their telepathic links. This time, his distress turned into a disappointed pout. "***I wanted to fight by your side! When was the last time we did this together? I can't even remember!***"

"***We'll get our time together, one day. Stop being an impatient brat.***"

And with that, Kuja bid farewell to his brother and the rest of the fleet. He left for the castle main hall, not even looking back as the airships took off in the air. With the silence he'd been granted from their connected minds, Kuja was aware Zidane was furious to be left alone with these Gaians in the war.

Well, that served him right to be such a reckless brat.

After avoiding all the cold stares he was getting from the staying soldiers who clearly did not agree with this war, when he reached the main hall, he encountered who he sought for. Over the stairs, before the giant portrait of the Queen and her former cat, the two royal jesters discussed and bounced around, uttering nonsenses to each other about the war and the loss of their three Black Waltzes to the group accompanying the Princess.

How pathetic.

The young man stood here, watching the jesters for a minute until he decided to exhibit his presence with a long, exhausted sigh. Zorn was the first to notice the mage's presence. Startled by him, he jumped to him with a yelp, with Thorn giving him a confused eye. "Oh! K-Kuja, you're here!" Zorn exclaimed with some stutter from the shock of his presence.

"Here you are, Kuja!" Thorn exclaimed in the same melodramatic way.

Unlike the jesters, Kuja didn't feel as excited as they seemed to be. "Did I hear of your Black Waltzes' failure?" he went straight to the point. As fear set in, the jesters covered their head with guilt, guilt of having created failures. Whatever the mage

will do to them, they were beginning to dread for what was to come. They were expecting some repercussion from the young man, whether it will be scolding or a physical abuse. His smile announced the calm before the storm.

Thankfully for them, Kuja was not as hostile as his brother Zidane. However, he bore that wicked, yet soft smile over his features. “Failures end with experience, experience will make you better,” the young man chanted like a song, a finger up to his chin as he walked forward the twins. “It does not matter if the Black Waltzes ended their lives as fast as they were born. Yourselves have the power to win this war and I am certain you can carry out a simple task such as capturing the Princess.”

The Princess’s mention brought the two small men shivers down their spine. Scared, they looked at each other for an instant before they overreacted again. “We will catch the Princess, promise!” Zorn cried.

“Catch the Princess, we will!” Thorn repeated after his brother.

“Oh, I’m sure you will,” Kuja said with a laugh. “Besides, I’d rather see you succeed than, let’s say…” There was a subtle pause as the young man

bended to the little men's level. "… get rid of you so you can return to your true form, am I right?"

Both twins froze, mute by the revelation from Kuja. The tailed man seemed to know too much already. "Meltigemini, does this word sound familiar to you?" he asked, his tone having taken a malicious turn. The jesters' trembling increased the closer Kuja walked to them. "Of course, you are more familiar with the word than I am. That is because you are one Meltigemini, that, I can tell as much."

Sweat dropped from their foreheads now that their cover had been busted by a simple word. Suddenly, they wished to hide away, ashamed by how this man knew who, or rather, *what* they truly were. "H-How do you know this? W-We've never told anyone!" they spoke as one together at the same time, just as one soul.

"I have to admit I had help," Kuja revealed, not too loud as to not attract any possible soldiers or servants on patrol nearby. "My younger brother has the ability to detect spiritual powers from people. He knew you were not true twins as soon as he saw you for the first time. He felt you as one soul. After digging into my researches, I have discovered the truth of your origins."

It all came down to that dastardly Monkey Boy again! This tailed boy brought them so much troubles… If their true nature would ever come to light to the Queen, they didn't want to imagine the possibilities of what she could do to them…

"I see you might be on something," the tailed young man said, his finger on his chin again like an idea struck him. "What do you think? If the Queen's gone, whether it is from her death or her increasing insanity, whichever will be more likely, would you both come work for me?"

Unexpectedly relieved by Kuja's suggestion, the jesters settled down. At least, Kuja wasn't going to kill them, but the idea of having to deal with the bratty, feral little brother of this man was another prospect that didn't please them as much.

Still, this was better than having to go back to their true form, where they will lose their own individuality. It was their biggest fear.

Kuja's offer was tempting…

Some fleets had already reached the kingdom of Burmecia before the Queen's airship, and the

carnage had taken place for some time. Bodies of the Burmecians were scattered across the capital like limp ragdolls damping under this heavy, cold rain. The scent of blood flourished in the air and flowed through the watery stream across the streets, blended with the desperate cries and screams of the citizens running for their lives, searching for their chance to escape this terrifying and unexpected massacre.

Even the Burmecian soldiers were unprepared for this war.

How ironic, to call the Burmecians a race of people who lived and vowed by war when they could not even fight these strange soulless puppets endowed with an impressive magic. These creatures had begun their carnage in the Gizamaluke's Grotto where the Burmecian master entity, a large water creature, resided. Its peaceful life had been shattered by this massacre when the Burmecian soldiers stationed in the grotto were killed by surprise. All these years of peace had left the grotto near unprotected by few untrained soldiers. At least, their master still lived, but with all the Mist the soulless mages brought to the grotto, their master had gone mad and had been reduced to a mere wild monster attacking everything that came to its grasp.

And then, the army of puppets ran to the capital where the carnage continued and went as smooth as expected by the Queen's advisor, with very few losses of their Black Mages and even better, no loss of Alexandrian soldiers. Unlike the sentient soldiers, the Black Mages offered no chance for escape and redemption, whether their unfortunate victims were men, women, elderly, children… No one within their grasps were spared as they were made to kill, kill, kill.

When the Queen arrived in Burmecia, she went to admire the fruits of her lifetime wherein the Black Mages stood victorious and the Burmecian rats crawled in their pools of blood. This was what they deserved for wanting to steal the Alexandrian light! They shall never get it, thanks to her army of Black Mages! Walking with her was the General and the younger tailed brother who seemed to stand out from this crowd. Neither the boy nor the General particularly appeared happy as the Queen over this dead city where the rain washed away all the blood into the sewers like the torrent was cleaning up the town.

Their unhappiness did not stem from the same reason, however. General Beatrix had her eyes wide from pure horror of this senseless war, and yet, she

was forced into this terrifying chaos by her allegiance to the kingdom that had initiated this massacre.

Zidane was disappointed that Kuja was not present. The death of these puny Gaians had no effect on his emotional stance.

“Half of these stinking rats are gone!” the Queen proclaimed as they reached the Palace where the Burmecian royal family resided. “But I want more! I want the King dead! Bring me his head!”

“Hey, want me to get the King? Leave that to me!” Zidane suggested out with a grin. He didn’t wait for the Queen’s order that he had already launched away from them, dashing deeper into the Palace to search for who the Alexandrian ruler sought for.

As Beatrix watched him run away from the scene with narrowed, confused brows, Brahne laughed. “My dear Beatrix, if only you can be as spontaneous as that Monkey Boy!” she teased the General. “This is the kind of recruit we need for Alexandria!”

With a gulp, the General did not add to this mockery. What was there to say, anyway? A pawn

like her did not question their superiors' orders. She had no choice but to comply.

They ventured deeper in the Palace too, but as expected, no living thing was found in the monument save for former, thriving crawling rats that now lied to the ground to never move again. Both servants and soldiers were scattered around inert, and whenever Beatrix spotted a child among the bodies, she couldn't help but shiver. Even her soldiers had enough heart and soul to spare the weak and innocents, unlike these heartless, soulless Black Mages that offered no mercy at all. General Beatrix was known as ruthless to the mass, but she had never gone as far as killing a completely harmless, innocent child.

Resigned to find the Burmecian King after an hour of search, the Queen and the General walked back to the Palace main entrance, where Kuja's brother had left them to find the king himself. Queen Brahne continued to brag about her Black Mages and Beatrix found herself bound to listen to everything. This insanity was becoming a borefest.

But the borefest was shattered by some unfamiliar footsteps behind them.

Unsheathing her sword, Beatrix turned around to detect a Burmecian soldier dashing forward the Queen with a war cry. “For Burmecia!”

Yet, the soldier had not even made half the distance between his spot and the Queen before something landed on him from high above, pinning him down to the ground, to both the Queen and General’s shock.

As the surrounding got clearer, they were faced with a Zidane on the top of the terrified soldier. Before the Burmecian even struggled or uttered another word, the tailed boy stabbed him in both the heart and the throat with his two daggers. Beatrix observed the scene in horror as the blood protruded from both injuries, with some splatters even splashing to the boy’s face. His cold, expressionless features had not flickered with an ounce of mercy and hesitation as the smile on his lips manifested a twist of malevolence. Even the tip of his furred tail twitched with a gratified joy from having landed a painful kill to the now gone soldier.

Beatrix had heard reports of the Tailed Brothers. Behind the Queen’s back, Beatrix had sent spies to check on the siblings as she suspected them of wrongdoings. Reports had told her that they would

usually go in the woods to take on very strong monsters together as a fighting training. Beatrix had actually never seen them in action except from these reports, and the spies had made mention of Kuja Tribal to be a particularly prominent mage with magic powers beyond a normal Gaian's reach, as if he was from another world.

However, reports on the younger brother, Zidane Tribal, were written with harsher words. The spies specifically used the word "murder" instead of the simple term of killing. Murdering all these monsters seemed to fill the boy with a cathartic joy and a thrilling experience. This was nothing like the generic satisfaction over dominating a situation just as Kuja displayed. No, the tailed young brother was happy to kill, as if he HAD to kill things, thus the use of the "murder" word.

These reports had started years ago, when Kuja was named the Queen's personal advisor, when Zidane was still a child. Beatrix initially couldn't believe that a child like him was able to kill in complete cold blood, and yet, she had just witnessed what the reports had claimed for years.

Certainly, Zidane was no longer a child by their culture standards, but he was still acting as one at

times.

Shaking her head to toss these thoughts away, she pondered about how the boy could have killed the Burmecian soldier in a flash. His stance, his eyes, they were so cold without emotion.

Who truly were the Tailed Brothers?

The event that came after didn't shock the General anymore. Unlike the horrified sensation Beatrix had experienced with the gruesome killing, Queen Brahne was filled with a liberating joy. "That was beautifully performed, Monkey Boy!" the royal woman exclaimed with a childish clasp. Zidane had not flinched at her words, like he didn't care. "Beatrix, have you seen this? In the blink of an eye, this little monkey ended this street rat before you could do anything! What a feat!"

Still outraged by her Queen's reaction, Beatrix only offered her a distressed glare before she sighed. At this point, she should even start to question her allegiance to a mad country.

"Nevertheless, I'm leaving the rest to you! Do not disappoint me!" Brahne ordered before she walked away to her nearby airship.

And thus, Beatrix and Zidane stood together in complete silence, each ignoring the other.

That killing joy that brought the boy his mad smile had left him by now. Yet, that soft, hard-to-read smug that his older brother often exhibited was still present over his lips. This did not bring more trust between the two. “Did you find the Burmecian King?” Beatrix broke the silence. She did not wish to start socializing with him, but if they boy had claimed earlier that he was going to find the Burmecian ruler, then she had the right to know the outcome.

“Nope,” was his answer. “A soldier told me the King escaped outside the city to somewhere. I don’t know where or how he had escaped; he wouldn’t tell me. Killed the soldier, too.”

A part of Beatrix seemed to be relieved to hear about the King’s safety, but she could not rejoice for too long as they heard more footsteps from behind.

A group of three strangers… A young man, a Burmecian fighter and… a tiny Black Mage?

Strange… Unusual from his spontaneous ways, Zidane didn’t attack them on the spot, but he did look shocked. “You…!” the tailed boy called them

with his gaze growing more intense and a growl escaping his mouth. “You’re the ones who’ve kidnapped Garnet!”

This explained why the tailed boy seemed so surprised. He had met them before. Beatrix lost no time. Taking her sword out and pointing it at the group, after adopting her defensive stance, she demanded, “Where’s the Princess?”

But the group didn’t appear to feel threatened. Instead, it was the Burmecian woman, a dragoon fighter and a red mage from the look of her attire, who took a step forward and began with a response. “Does it really matter right now?” she cried with a visible fury on her features, holding out her spear and ready to fight. “The Princess’s safe, but you brought this carnage over all these innocent people! How could you not even feel the slightest guilt over this, General Beatrix?!”

Instead of being given an answer, the Burmecian was interrupted by the most unexpected part of the little group. The small prototype of a Black Mage shyly spoke with its child voice, “Dag… Garnet left us by herself. S-She probably went back to Alexandria…”

“Vivi, you shouldn’t have said that!” the young male Human Zidane remembered as Blank cried to the tiny Black Mage. This entire conversation was odd to the tailed boy and he tried to gather everything to understand what was happening.

The Black Mage prototype, who seemed to have adopted the name of Vivi, spoke like a normal individual with a soul and its own personality… or rather, HIS own personality. Clearly, his companions labelled him as a male. How was this even possible? Sure, Kuja had used the Mist to fuel life into these Black Mages, and they knew the Mist were the remnant of lost Gaian souls that couldn’t return to the planet’s crystal. Still, he couldn’t understand how this prototype named Vivi could gain a soul on his own. What if the same should happen to all the other Black Mages?

Also, Queen Brahne’s prediction to see the Princess return to Alexandria might be right. How did she guess this?

“This unfortunate bloodshed is a necessity to protect Alexandria from your power-hungry ways!” Beatrix ignored the two males of the group, now keeping her focus on the Burmecian woman instead.

“W-What? How did you come with this senseless conclusion?!” the dragoon shrieked out of shock.

“Freya’s right! This doesn’t make any sense!” Blank shouted out at the Alexandrian General in protest as he unsheathed his sword, expecting a fight to come. So, it seemed the Burmecian’s name was Freya.

“Fools,” Beatrix said all calmly, tossing her hair braid aside and ready to fight at any time now. “Are you truly trying to best Alexandria in this war? Just surrender. Escape this place and I will show mercy to you, but do not try to best against our army or I. You are no match for me.”

Startled, Zidane blinked at the General. “*Me*?” he mocked his Alexandrian partner with a faint grin.

Seeing that the group appeared nowhere to surrender, Beatrix prepared her speech before her fight. “Well, is that so? You fight me, you are enemies of Alexandria. You—”

Her speech was interrupted by a yelp when Blank stopped a sudden slash of a dagger from Zidane. Visibly, like an impatient child, the Monkey Boy was not going to wait for them to end their long speech. Prompted to help and protect their friend,

both Freya and Vivi quickly took action and began their attack, with Vivi focusing on targeting the tailed boy with his magic and Freya going after the General by herself. As General Beatrix embodied the Alexandria kingdom, Freya's vengeful thoughts were all drawn onto her. Without waiting, Beatrix was forced into the battle.

Without Garnet and her Eidolons, this should be an easy fight, for Zidane, at least.

Zidane was about to get roasted by Vivi's Fira spell but he ducked the attack by rolling himself closer to the dragoon who had no longer paid attention to his presence. Having been alerted by him, Freya did not realize that Zidane was taking advantage of her short distraction to deal a blow through her chest with his dagger. Freya quickly stepped backward, avoiding most of the blow but a small cut on her chest began to bleed. From the look of it, the Monkey Boy had intended to give her the killing blow immediately by aiming for her throat, which he, thankfully, failed to offer.

Unlike the way Beatrix fought, just like these soulless Black Mages, Zidane was not showing an inch of mercy. If he could, he'd murder them all.

Because of this, Freya shouted at her comrades, “Focus on the Monkey Boy! I’ll take care of the General!”

Blank and Vivi nodded and went back to action as Zidane was not giving them any rest. Satisfied that her companions agreed with her strategy, Freya dashed further away from them and indicated to the General to follow her in a one-to-one combat. Without further ado, Beatrix agreed to follow. “I believe this is it!” the Burmecian cried at the Alexandrian General.

“It does not matter to me!” Beatrix shouted back. “I can fight ten soldiers single-handed! Whether you fight me alone or with your companions, you will fall under my blade!”

As both Zidane and Blank clashed their blades against the other, the tailed boy noticed an upcoming beam of magic spell from the Black Mage. Crouching fast to avoid another Fira spell, he quickly resumed his attacking stance, ready to stab and cut this Tantalus swordsman to death. He got to admit, Blank was more skilled than he would have expected from a lowly Gaian commoner. With the Vivi boy accompanying him in this battle, this fight won’t be as easy as he had envisaged.

When he glanced for a moment back to the two fighting women, he noticed that both had sustained quite an amount of injuries. Yet, despite her lower potential for spiritual energy, Freya seemed to have the upper hand.

And then something strange occurred.

When a glow shined upon her silhouette, Freya's spiritual powers suddenly increased exponentially from a mere minute ago. It felt like the light surrounding her gave her a surge of strength that was beyond his imagination, like an adrenaline rush. It was something he had never seen before.

Still, having Blank and Vivi running after him, he couldn't focus on this strange power for too long.

He had to formulate a plan, fast.

Like he was giving up his fight, Zidane escaped from the two Gaian males, ignoring all the slurs and curses from Blank who shouted at him to come back. The Monkey Boy came closer to where the two women were battling, both exhausted from the fight. Thankfully, the boy still had the same thrilling energy from the beginning of this fight. Staying closer the General and ally, he remained by her sides while he watched as Blank and Vivi joined their

friend Freya, the Burmecian still surrounded by that odd, magical glow.

Strange, this glow did not seem to impress anyone but Zidane himself, like they knew what was going on with the Burmecian woman.

Finally, what Zidane wished to happen occurred.

“Fools, time to end this game,” General Beatrix uttered as she rose her sword again before going for a war cry. “Shock Break!”

A flash of magic flowed through her weapon, and when it gathered enough powers, she jumped high and landed in the middle of the group, hitting them all with a powerful magical blow. This attack power brought her enemies to the wet ground so hard that none of them were able to stand back on their feet.

Truth be told, Beatrix had not even checked who was around. She had no care if the Monkey Boy was among the group. Even if he was technically on Alexandria’s side, he was an enemy to her own agenda, whatever the Queen might think about him. He had to pay for his insolence and he deserved to be injured, and even better, killed by that blow!

Yet, when she looked around her surrounding, only three enemies were down as they struggled to

get back on their feet. The tailed boy was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, it was when she looked up that she saw him, kneeling on one of the Palace's high statues and grinning at her, unharmed from her Shock Break attack.

Dammit! How did he avoid that blow? No one had ever escaped that attack! That boy couldn't be human!

Fists on his hips, Zidane kept his teasing grin. Yet, he had that frown unveiling infuriation. With a snarl, he shouted after her, "Rose! What was that for?! I thought I was on your side!"

"Shut up, boy!" Beatrix instinctively barked at him, losing her temper. "How dare you keep attacking so recklessly like this?"

The grin on Zidane was now swept away by a furious sulk. Baring his teeth at her, he screamed back, "Because you speak too much! So much lost time!" This was it; the anger was intensifying to the point he couldn't stop growling at her. He had to share that fury upon her, to show her that she should have never provoked him.

“***Kuja! She’s annoying! I’m going to kill Beatrix!***”

When he unleashed his daggers from his belt, he quickly got a reply from his brother. “***What? Zidane, what’s going on?***” Kuja’s remote reply sounded filled with worries.

However, Zidane’s attention was no longer focused on his brother. He was too stuck on trying to defeat that despicable General to even give Kuja a response. Lost in her temper, Beatrix screamed after him again, her sword ready. “I don’t care that you’re under the Queen’s protection! To me, you’re nothing more than a grotesque insect!”

Keeping on with his growls and his bared teeth, Zidane leapt from his statue with his daggers ready to shred the General apart.

“***Zidane! That’s enough!***”

The shout from his brother through their connected minds was enough to distract him from the fight. As soon as he landed on the ground, Zidane immediately bounced back to another high statue before reaching the top of a roof, escaping from Beatrix who still was stuck on the ground. Now out of her reach, Zidane gazed at the woman,

contemplating from his high spot her rising anger. “You! Come back here!” the Alexandrian General screamed at him.

“***Zidane,***” a more composed Kuja began, now trusting that his brother had stopped attacking the General from the calm he felt from Zidane’s thoughts. “***You can murder all the street rats for all I care, but do not kill the delicate roses like General Beatrix.***”

“***But she attacked me first!***” Zidane protested in his mind.

“***Just leave her by,***” the older brother affirmed. “***The Queen is planning to attack Cleyra to get the Desert Star from the Cleyrans, and we still need Beatrix to lead the attack there. You need to come back to Alexandria. We have captured the Princess.***”

“***W-What?! Garnet’s there?***” Zidane’s rush for action suddenly vanished. Appeasing himself, he couldn’t help but grin at the thought. He couldn’t wait to reunite with the Princess and see her suffer for everything she had done to him!

He brought his attention back at Beatrix below and he shouted, “Hey, Rose! Thanks for taking care

of the happy little group of vagabonds, but I must bid you farewell!”

The rage building inside her abruptly increased at the nickname. “Stop calling me Rose!” Beatrix yelled back.

Content to see her anger amplifying, Zidane grinned wider. He shouted, “Well, too bad for you! I was told to let you live! I must get going! Urgent family matters, I guess!”

Before Beatrix thought of an answer, a roar echoed in the air like an imminent doom awaiting. When she looked back to the roof where the Monkey Boy stood, she couldn’t believe what she saw.

A huge white dragon landed on the roof before the boy, purring on its way to nuzzle with the young man before he caressed its face. The dragon welcomed him on its back. As Zidane mounted on it, the dragon took off, flying straight to the East where Alexandria stood.

And then, everything clicked.

Years ago, in the King’s private quarters… A bloodied body, a little boy and a dragon… Reports from the two soldiers who had discovered the scene

spoke of a dragon with a light-colored head full of blood on its muzzle as the boy had tried to “fend it off”.

From now on, Beatrix knew the truth.

Six years ago, the tailed child had murdered King Alexander.

Author’s note*: This chapter’s much longer than I anticipated…*

I made few changes from the canon, like the jesters and Kuja staying in Alexandria instead of going to the war. I thought the whole traveling super fast in the game made little sense (well, yeah, they had these teleport vase things but still, we only see them once in the game), like how the jesters were in Burmecia a moment to meet the main group, but managed to capture Dagger’s group “few minutes” after in Alexandria. I know the airships travel fast and the Mist Continent isn’t that big in-game, but on a plot point-of-view, that’s kind of dumb.

I always thought Freya not having a scripted Trance moment in the entire game was weird,

especially after what happened to Burmecia and Cleyra. So yeah, I added one in this fic.

Chapter 17: Loyalty

The following was supposed to be part of the already very long previous chapter.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 17: Loyalty

"Your Majesty, may I have a word?"

"Of course, Beatrix. Shoot away."

Looking to the side with a gulp, Beatrix was unsure how to approach the subject with the Queen. To remind Her Majesty of such traumatic experience and important event of the past might trigger some unwanted reactions from the ruler. After giving a long sigh, Beatrix said, "Do you remember what had killed King Alexander?"

The subject seemed to have brought the Queen a slight shock before silence set in and she remained quiet. Years of being under someone else's influence had driven her to project a façade that hid her former gentle personage. Pensive, the Queen gazed at the blue sky, the wind of the Red Rose airship blowing

gently. “Oh, goodness, yes,” Queen Brahne said, gulping at her words and fanning her face faster. “A vile dragon had devoured my dear husband.”

“And you do remember who was with him in the same room, right?” the General asked, checking if the Queen was following her logic.

The Queen stayed unchanged. “Yes, yes, the Monkey Boy was present too. My dear Alexander and the boy were having a card game, if I recall. The dragon attacked my husband and the boy shooed the beast away, but he got himself injured in the process.”

“Right, I believe this is what the report said.” Beatrix wasn’t truly prepared for what was to come next, but at this point, with her Queen’s insanity growing stronger by days, she had nothing else to lose. “I have just witnessed Zidane taking off with a flying dragon earlier.”

The Queen stopped fanning herself. Giving her General the coldest of the glares, she barked, “What are you insinuating?”

“I… believe Zidane is responsible for His Majesty’s demise.”

Another awkward silence. Beatrix was about to back up her theory when she was interrupted by the Queen. “The soldiers saw the deep bite marks on my husband. They saw the blood leaking from the dragon’s mouth and teeth. Are you saying that a small child of ten-year-old had killed Alexander in such gruesome manner? Only a huge beast could have done this!”

“This is why I’m bringing this up, Your Majesty!” Beatrix begged her Queen to listen, concerned by the clear denial from her. “The report spoke of a light-colored dragon devouring the King. What if that dragon Zidane took off with is the same dragon? The dragon I saw in Burmecia with him was light-colored too. It is too much of a coincidence. I believe that dragon is his and that he had ordered it to kill His Majesty, six years ago.”

Perhaps it was too late to save the Queen from being consumed by madness. It seemed futile to attempt at convincing her of anything else than whatever ideals that tailed nobleman had been shoving into her. Beatrix did everything to bring common senses to her Queen, to wake her back in the reality where this senseless war should not happen. The General wanted the Queen to see that everything she had done so far against her enemies

were for naught. This was nothing but the chef-d'oeuvre of the Tribal noblemen for having corrupting the Queen to do their biddings. Even now, Queen Brahne refused to give an ounce of credit to her General's plausible theory.

"It can't be," the ruler said, resuming her fanning like she was not troubled by it. "Why would the Monkey Boy order such a thing? His brother Kuja gave us everything! He let us use his own puppets so we can protect Alexandria from these despicable rodents!"

Disappointed but not surprised by her Queen's reaction, Beatrix shook her head in defeat. "But, Your Maj—"

"Out of my way, Beatrix. You're hiding the sun."

His trip to Alexandria went fast, he thought.

There was this upbeat, thrilling rush giving him goosebumps across his body with the idea of coming back to the castle. He couldn't stop that smile from beaming over his lips with the prospect of seeing Garnet again. Perhaps the excitement to see her made the time run faster. He'd been so excited of

what was to come, to see the extraction ceremony, to see Garnet suffer.

All this brought him joy.

"***How's Garnet?***" Zidane asked his brother with their telepathic link.

"***She's resting in her room,***" Kuja answered. "***The jesters are making sure she won't escape.***"

No words on Eidolons attacks. At least Kuja was safe.

"***What about Rusty? I heard he was with her.***"

"***He's detained in the dungeon with another member of Tantalus.***"

"***Oh, we're safe to proceed with the extraction, then.***"

"***Yes, and we're waiting for you to come and see the show.***"

How nice of Kuja to wait for him…

…

He could not tell why Kuja pushed him to meet with the Princess, but there he was, reluctantly knocking on the door to her private room. Zidane

had protested with the idea at first, thinking Garnet might send her Eidolons at him again, but Kuja made himself reassuring when he said with certainty that she was not going to. Why was his older brother so confident about it?

Well, he was about to know soon.

Garnet came to open the door. In a not so distant past, she'd usually greet him with a soft, shy smile, but this time, she wore a sad frown and a sulk over her face. Despite having come back here on her own, she did not wish to be here, he could tell. "Z-Zidane…" she called him as she put her hands over her chest. The sound of her voice bore great sadness and regrets.

Why was his heart racing so strong and fast…?

It was so strange. Just moments ago, revenge was the only idea crossing his mind when Zidane had thoughts of the young Princess. A mad happiness had been all over him over the aspect to see her lose her Eidolons and maybe even her life. But now, as he was standing right before the very subject of his mad thoughts, it felt like the whole ordeal that had occurred in the Ice Cavern and where Zidane had nearly lost his life was falling apart. The pure hatred he bore toward her had changed into some kind of

relief and joy to see her alive and well. His heart clung hard to his rib cage, pumping the blood harder and stronger than ever, much to his horror.

Was this love again?

No, that was not it. He didn't love her anymore, and yet… he couldn't get himself to hate her.

"Hey, Garnet…" Zidane called back, scratching the back of his head and internally fighting to suppress these annoying heartbeats. "It's been… some times… How've you been?"

He thought his words would have a calming effect, but all that came from Garnet was the opposite. Furious, she turned away from him. "Do I look like I'm happy?!" she uttered out of anger and rage. Uneasy around her, Zidane took a step back. She even began to cry tears. "I just learned that my mother's a murderer! She has brought a genocide on a national scale against the innocent Burmecians! It's all… all…" After choking and sobbing few times, she turned to him and cried, "… your brother's fault!"

Taken aback, a shiver ran across Zidane's back. He did not deny the claim. After all, Garnet was right. He was not certain how to approach the

subject now. However, the Princess's gaze to the young man softened as her tears began to blur her vision. "I-I a-apologize," she stuttered to him, struggling to get her words right. "I know it's just… your brother, but… you, Zidane… have nothing to do with this… r-right?"

Another rush came through and guilt hit him hard. Zidane looked away, unsure what to respond. Garnet sniffled once more and rubbed her eyes from all the tears. Slowly, she began, "I… I also apologize… about earlier… You know… in the Ice Cavern… I didn't want to summon an… an… Eidolon on you but… I-I was so scared…!"

Having unwillingly thrown out her outburst at the young man, Garnet was afraid of his reaction. She had expected him to enter into a madness that might trigger his feral side once more, like the day he had saved her years ago, like when he had attacked her friends in the Ice Cavern. However, she was relieved to see that he didn't flinch much. He appeared even more remorseful.

"It's… okay," the young man commented without staring at her. "Guess I've overreacted back there too."

How could Zidane forgive her already after he had been so near to die from her Eidolons? This was sounding too suspicious…

“You did not come here to merely speak of blatant things, am I right?” the Princess said bluntly. Her crying had stopped, leaving her with determination instead.

Zidane remained silent longer before he admitted, “Yeah, they requested me to escort you to the Queen because she wants to speak with you.”

At this, Garnet’s mouth went agape. “M-Mother’s here?”

Their walk to the throne room went awkward without any word exchanged between the two young adults. Zidane led the way and Garnet followed from behind. There was so much Zidane wished to tell Garnet, how sorry he’d been for being part of the reason of her great sadness, that he didn’t really want this war to happen. Unfortunately, the boy never found his right moment to tell her anything.

Perhaps there will never be a right moment for this, anyway.

Thankfully, the walk only lasted about three minutes which felt like an awful eternity for him. At

the end of their trip, Queen Brahne was indeed present on her throne, fanning herself as usual. When she heard the soft steps from her daughter, Brahne turned around to see Garnet taking one decisive step forward her mother. “Mother!” the Princess called, her voice full of hope, hope to bring back the warmth into her sole parent’s heart.

Queen Brahne offered a warm smile at her, though only Garnet knew this as the same cold façade she’d been using for years whenever both mother and daughter were having private family moments. “Oh, sweetie!” the Queen called her worried daughter. She opened her arms, expecting Garnet to come for a nice hug, but the daughter stayed on her spot, closer to an indifferent Zidane. Right now, even the young man appeared less threatening than her mother.

“Mother, I… we need to talk,” Garnet began, her voice and her body shaking.

Despite all, Queen Brahne seemed the least concerned of Garnet’s worries. “Yes, my dear, don’t be afraid,” the woman said, adopting her sweetest voice.

Trying to gather her confidence, Garnet pulled herself closer to her mother. “Was… the attack in

Burmecia… necessary?”

Having not flinched, the Queen did not look surprised by the question. In fact, she appeared to be the most prepared for it like she had envisioned this question to come. Her tone taking a rude tone, Brahne said, “Yes, it was. It was for Alexandria’s good, just as your father wished.”

“Father wanted peace and harmony over the whole Mist Continent, not just Alexandria!” the young girl contested. “I am certain that Burmecia was never going to attack Alexandria. They were not even prepared for this war!”

“Oh, Garnet, you’re living on sunshine and fairy tales,” the mother commented with a sigh. “You need to learn to see through the layers beneath a person. The Burmecians have never shown sign of rebellion because they were merely hiding it.”

“I don’t believe you!” A sudden outburst escaped the Princess, startling both the Queen and Zidane. “It was all that tailed nobleman’s fault! He’s corrupting you!”

“Tailed nobleman’s fault? This is such a baseless claim, Your Highness.”

This was not Zidane’s voice. This came from another direction where everyone turned to, a voice Zidane immediately recognized. They all glared at Kuja who had just come in time for the mother and daughter’s reunion. The young man walked past his younger brother, offering him an amicable pat on the shoulder before he went closer to the Princess who took a secured step back. Even the Queen did not say anything to the man’s presence. “You need to open your eyes and see the cruel world outside your perfect, lush cage,” Kuja claimed to the Princess, closer to her by the seconds, never leaving that gentle, yet wicked smile off his lips. “The Burmecians are nothing but street rats crawling under Gaia’s shadows. They desire the best. They wish the Alexandrian grounds for themselves.”

Feeling threatened by Kuja’s presence, Garnet took another nervous step back. She glared at her mother in distress, narrowing her brows with worries, hoping for her old motherly and protective side to come back at her. Perhaps she’ll find the former Queen, no, mother, once again…

However, the Queen merely carried on with fanning her face without adding a word or even lifting a finger to protect her daughter. Her stance had not changed at all.

No, this couldn’t be. There still was hope! As her last resort, she turned her nervous gaze to her old tailed friend. Looking back at him, she saw the courageous young boy of her old times, the strange, yet bright and strong child who had massacred these two bandits who were going to capture her to an unknown fate. She needed a hero right now, and this boy was the only one with the potential to save her! She waited for him to become that hero she needed, to make the first move.

She waited… and waited…

“***Zidane, I know the Princess is looking at you to gain your protection. She wants to manipulate you. Do not look at her.***”

Keeping up with Kuja’s advice, Zidane retracted his eyes away from the girl in complete silence, to Garnet’s despair. She was cornered by three people.

Now standing to the Princess’s side, not even concerned by her dread and terror, Kuja rose his hand over her and began a faint spell. “Do not worry about this war, dear Princess,” he cooed with a hum and a melody followed when a dim glow surrounded the palm of his hand. Garnet froze on place. “It is none of your concern. Hush. Slumber well, my little canary.”

The light glowed brighter, which soon engulfed the young woman beneath in a spell that she could not fight. Watching in horror as her lids grew heavy, she struggled to remain wide awake and tried slapping her face several times until her limbs, too, gained too much weight. She could not resist the spell any longer, and as soon as her vision began to blur, she surrendered her consciousness. She let herself drop on the floor, only for a running Zidane to catch her before Garnet landed on the ground.

This was the last of her vision. She sensed and saw Zidane catching her. Even in the mist of the blur, she gazed at his face, feeling safer in his arms.

Confident he will save her from this nightmare, she let the torpor get the best of her to join the world of fleeting dreams.

When silence set in, a chuckle interrupted the peace. “It is time for the extraction, Your Majesty,” Kuja revealed to the Queen. When he saw her smile broadened with a bizarre delight, he giggled with her.

When Zidane lost his focus on everyone around him, he gave a soft gaze to the young sleeping woman he was holding gently. Despite the dried

tears over her eyes, Garnet slumbered like she was in peace in Zidane's arms.

And it granted him a smile.

Yet, he couldn't tell what kind of smile that was.

"I want Garnet executed."

"W-What?"

When the Queen had made this announcement to the Tailed Brothers and the jesters who had joined them later, none of the men could stand still and tight. Not even Kuja's legendary calm spared him of keeping his focus. He was as startled as the others, and yet, he was the first to regain his composure. "The extraction is a success," Brahne commented, holding few colored gems in her hands before a mad smile spread over her face. "I have my daughter's Eidolons. I have the power now. She is of no use anymore. I want her executed."

As the Queen admired the magical gems, the four men gave a short glare at the slumbering Summoner who was now deprived of the Eidolons that had followed through her life as a part of her. After giving some thoughts, Kuja bowed to the Queen,

saying, “Of course, Your Majesty. Allow me to carry on with your wish. I shall see the order executed with perfection.”

“Oh, and how are you going to dispose of her?” Brahne inquired, curious of the details of seeing her child killed.

“Certainly, have you forgotten about my subpar magic potential?” Kuja chuckled at the royal woman. “Getting rid of a mere young woman is nothing but an easy game for me.”

“I’ll do it,” Zidane took over the conversation, bluntly interrupting his brother’s discussion with the Queen and even taking a step before him.

Hiding his doubts from the Queen and the jesters, Kuja reverted the discussion to their connected minds. “***Zidane, you can’t do this,***” Kuja objected.

“***Garnet ordered Bahamut to kill me,***” Zidane protested at him while trying to hide his anger from the others. “***It’s only fair that I get the right to kill her. She deserves to die from my own hands. If I can kill her, then I’ll be free from the grip she holds over my heart. I will do this, trust me.***”

A loud laugh surged from the Alexandrian ruler. “And there I thought the Monkey Boy wanted my

daughter's hand!" she giggled at the thought, and this time, even Zidane hadn't given any reaction to this love joke. "That's too bad. The two of you would have made such a lovely couple."

When she was done with all the mad laughing and the magical gems admiration, the Queen left the group with Kuja escorting her to the throne room from a secret passage. They were headed to the Red Rose airship for another attack to Burmecia's sister city, Cleyra, where they will find the Desert Star they coveted much. Once again, Zidane found himself alone with the vague presence of the twin jesters and the sleeping Princess in this dungeon. When Zorn and Thorn would not leave each other and began to talk behind the boy's back, Zidane sighed and thought it was wiser to ignore them.

It was his time to shine in this sad, lonely day.

To shine brighter, Zidane walked forward the ceremony altar where Garnet lied asleep on the cold concrete the boy had painted some time ago. He stood, watching her slumber, mute and unmoved by the soothing up and down movement of her sleeping breathing. There it came, the burning, raging flame of anger and madness growing stronger and wilder with each passing second as he laid his gaze on her,

the smoke of his fury emanating from his silhouette. With his eyes shifting darker and colder, the Princess's body reflected perfectly over his livid eyes, and soon the shine of his dagger.

The thoughts of Bahamut and her betrayal crossed his mind like a limpid, perfect projection of his life.

A dagger ready over Garnet's chest, hands gripped firmly to the blade, he was ready.

Ready to murder the Princess he used to love.

"Good bye, Garnet."

…

His dagger dropped. Straight to the floor in a clinging clash.

Zidane froze, clouded by unwanted thoughts, the thoughts that gave him happiness and joy in this time of mad crisis. He did not want these thoughts right now. They were in the way to his goal of killing the Princess! All these happy thoughts of her beautiful silhouette, her cute face, her warming smile… All the fun discussions he had shared with her came to haunt his obsessive needs for a bloodshed.

Garnet's soft, true words which he had never told anyone else, not even Kuja…

Zidane.

Yeah?

How are you faring?

I don't know.

You do not appear very enthusiastic today.

Mm…

It's the others, right?

What?

They do not appreciate you. They don't like when you hang around me.

I… know.

I apologize on their behalf. But… you know, I welcome your presence around me. You are kinder than what others make it seems like.

Huh?

You are better than your brother, I can tell. You are not like him. You explore the world a lot, and… you represent what the outside world is to me. You

can hang with me all you want, so I can feel the outside world too.

G-Garnet…

…

The reminiscences of that day a year ago, when Zidane had been so close to surrender to her caresses and touches… Even her hands had been brushing against his arms, his shoulders and finally his cheeks. He could never forget that hot blush on his face and that shiver down his skin and the fur of his tail… Zidane had been so close to reject his convictions to never lay a finger on her, to give up his respect for her, to love her… Garnet had told him that day that she was welcoming more than his presence.

No, that wasn't his own need. What if… What if it had been the Princess all along who had coveted for his warmth?

That could not be! Kuja told him the Gaians did not like them!

And this had been exactly why, that day a year ago, Zidane had to run away from her needs to be around him. He had escaped her physical demands to never get the request from her again to this day.

As if time came back to the present, the loud clang of his dagger caught the attention from the jesters who suddenly stared at him, mouth agape when they noticed the tailed boy, all stiff and frozen, his distressed glare drawn to the Princess. Even the twins could see the troubled emotions beneath the boy who was trying to tame his mind with such conflicts, like there was an angel and a devil trying to push the boy into doing what was right or wrong. Zidane tried hiding his distress, but his tail continued to expose his true self as it curled inward to the side of his legs like a submissive, scared Fang.

He could not do it. He could no longer kill the Princess.

The love of his past resurfacing like an agonizing nightmare, he caught his head with his hands, fighting to tame his thoughts. His vision never left the girl of his dreams, the girl who slumbered peacefully during his own crisis beneath his mind. He shivered and shook himself harder as he realized that he could no longer proceed with a simple killing he should have already carried on without hesitating, if another person was at her place.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Exposed to you, she is!”

He heard faint voices behind his back, but he was unable to make them out clear, like his processing brain was tossing everything but Garnet from his mind.

“It’s time for the execution!”

“Completely out of cold, she is!”

“You will not have another occasion for this!

“Right, he is!”

“You can do it!”

“Do it, y—”

“SHUT UP!”

When Zidane’s sudden scream had completely shut the twin jesters into fear, there was something even more distressing coming from the tailed young man which caught them in a bigger terror.

A faint glow enveloped the boy as he growled at them with his bare teeth like a wicked predator, ready to tear the twins apart. Terrified of the spectacle before them, Zorn and Thorn came to hug each other with uncontrollable shivers, unable to take their sight away from the glowing Monkey Boy.

They couldn’t believe what they were seeing before them.

Growing feathers over his head pushed to the air as the rest of his self turned into a pinkish red shade. His eyes slowly shifted into crimson blood with a burning rage intensifying beneath. The aura around him grew in power and fury until…

Everything halted and the boy returned to normal as he caught his head in confusion, eyes wide in horror.

What had just happened?

From where they stood, the twins stayed there, motionless from the fear of dying after watching the mad boy clutching after himself. Thankfully, Zidane began to settle himself like he had been fighting something from beneath, a battle only he could tame. The jesters could not tell how and why, but for an instant, Zidane had appeared to be changing into something out of this world, like a magical furred beast, nothing they had ever seen in their long lives.

Strangely, from the look of it, the tailed boy appeared completely oblivious to his short and slow transformation. He had been too busy to fight off whatever was disturbing him from the inside. He

stood still, remaining by Garnet's sides with his tail shyly curled to his left, his knees bent, his arms dropped heavy and his eyes darted to the ceiling. Conflicts and emotions blending in his mind, he shut his lids, trying to think through.

He sought for comfort.

"***Kuja! I'm so sorry… I can't do this…***" Zidane began to say in his confusion through their connected link.

To his surprise, Kuja gave an immediate response. Zidane even sensed the amicable, soothing chuckle he was so familiar with from his brother. "***I see. Don't worry about it. The Princess is currently no threat to us. There is no harm in leaving her alive because she is powerless without her Eidolons. Let her be.***"

The boy gulped. He had not anticipated to get Kuja's approval over his childishness. If this was someone else instead of the Princess on this altar, that someone else should have already bathed over their pool of blood with a dagger sticking out of their chest. None of that had happened, and all Zidane wished now was for his brother to come with him and reassured him that everything will be okay.

Having no one to soothe him was not the same, and he wasn't certain what to think of this.

Looking back at the young sleeping girl reminded him how she used to look up to him before this whole war thing, before everything.

Yes, years ago, when Garnet was faced with these two ruthless men who were about to ruin her life forever, when Zidane had come to save her… And then, that day, when Garnet and Zidane were sitting alone in the castle garden, by the fountain where they first met, when she coveted his body warmth which he had never provided her out of fear, denial and respect…

No, Kuja was wrong! Garnet liked him! Zidane won't kill someone who liked him!

But now… Garnet knew of Queen Brahne's betrayal. She knew of Kuja's role in her descent to corruption and madness. She suspected Zidane's role in this too as Kuja's loyal younger brother.

He did not know what he should do. A solid, growing thread he clung to blocked his pathway to the madness and the pure malevolence he needed to execute the Princess. Instead, that hard thread maintained him to turmoil and sorrow. All these

overwhelming emotions would not leave him, and he wished for that suffering to stop. He despised having to deal with all these difficult emotions, and now, all he wanted was to become an empty shell devoid of sentiment and suffering, like a true Genome. Emotions were in the ways to his goals.

Tears began to soak his eyes.

For the rest of the day, he swore to remain by his cherished Garnet, away from the jesters who were still too scared to make a single step toward him. Tired from everything, slumber soon overwhelmed him, and after laying his head over the altar beside the sleeping Princess, he dropped himself to dreamland.

When he woke up, the jesters were no longer around. He was alone in the extraction hall.

Well, the Princess was still here, slumbering in peace on the altar and lost in dreams, unaware of the absence of her Eidolons. Even after the ceremony, she appeared untouched and well like she’d been having pleasant dreams. Making sure there were no other presence nearby, he looked around to see if the jesters or others were hidden somewhere close, but

he could not feel anything but the reduced spiritual powers from Garnet.

Analyzing the flickering flames on the torches across the hall that were close to die out, he estimated he had been napping for few hours.

After a big stretch of his entire body, Zidane thought to contact Kuja for some news of this whole war, but he decided it was simply best to not worry about anything but himself and his state now. Perhaps he should put Garnet back on a more comfortable bed, but it was an unlikely idea when Queen Brahne had already ordered her daughter executed. Instead of moving her, he sat beside her, gifting her a silent gaze before he offered her a soft stroke to her hair.

He shivered.

Aside from accidental and short bumps, Zidane had actually never touched Garnet like this before. Kuja had told him to keep the physical contacts with others at a minimum, as being a Princess meant that Garnet had to keep her guard from others. Even her personal guardians and soldiers were to never lay a hand on her unless necessary for her survival. But Zidane hadn’t been seeing this as a rule or law to

never touch her. No, to him, it was a question of respect, respect for someone who actually liked him.

Right now, he wanted to touch her, to caress her, but keeping up with the respect Garnet deserved, Zidane stayed tame. However, he needed to feel her smooth, silk long dark hair between his rough fingers and the warm, soft skin of her cheeks with a hand.

The warm contact and comforting rush they were offering soothed him. He could go on for hours.

Lost in thoughts, he began to imagine alternate scenarios in his mind. How would have it been like if he was a simple Human who did not hail from an alien world inhabited by empty vessels? What would have he become if it was a possibility for him to live with the Princess without being judged for being his big brother’s shadow?

How he longed to plan normal human things, to be in love with someone, to form a family and to have children to love. To be loved by another member outside his small Genome family was now a dream he craved ever since he realized that the Princess might like him the way he was. What will their children look like? Will they have a horn? A tail? Could he and Garnet even conceive children

together despite the different genetic setups of their bodies?

But the aspect of a blood family seemed to be a distant concept for one who had been created and engineered with a purpose to destroy the world of the one he loved.

This being a distant concept triggered deception and rage within him. Why wasn't he born like the others? Why wasn't he a simple Gaian, too?

To live in a world where everything and everyone seemed so distant tormented him, and he felt alone.

"***Zidane.***"

This was not Kuja's voice. He'd recognize that voice in his mind everywhere.

"***You need to remember the path of your existence. You are to bring death to Gaia.***"

Without stopping his cycle of brushing the Princess's hair with his fingers, Zidane remained calm. "***Shut up, Garland,***" he responded in their connected minds.

"***You cannot not deny your purpose. You were created to bring destruction of this planet. Too***

many years have already been dragged without you having done any action. The time has come."

How he hated to hear the old man's voice in his mind and how he would remind the boy that he was different. How he despised that he could not brush off his presence from his existence.

"***Kuja's doing this already,***" Zidane replied, and now, caressing the sleeping Garnet had become a more difficult task for him with Garland gaining his attention.

"***You know Kuja's a failed prototype. I don't need you to make me repeat this constantly.***"

His hands were shaking. "***Kuja's Kuja, that's all.***"

"***And you know your other purpose of life too.***"

Zidane froze this time. "***No, you're wrong,***" the boy objected, terror waving over him now.

"***And that purpose is to bring death to him.***"

"***No!***"

"***To Kuja.***"

"NO, JUST SHUT UP!"

Zidane’s scream had come to him as a shock, not even realizing he’d been screaming alone in this grand hall where only he could hear his own cries. Garnet still lied asleep by his sides and even his blaring scream couldn’t bring her back to awakening.

Taking hold of himself, Zidane shook his head before he decided it was best to forget about what Garland had just told him. He needed to draw his focus back to the girl he loved. Then, ignoring the old man will be easier. All this tired him. He wanted to return to the world of dreams, where he will be able to forget about his miserable destiny.

Before he was given the possibility to lie himself back to sleep, some frenetic sounds shattered his peace, all way to the opposite side of the hall. When he dashed forward and looked around, he heard the cries of several people, with noises of weapon clashes and magical spells. These sounded like…

A battle!

Well, knowing that Garnet was out of reach from anyone where she rested, he rushed to the commotion, his daggers ready for action, expecting to get a taste of blood from the fight. The thought gave him a shiver down his spine and up to his

bristled tail. This was where he faced some unlikely opponents.

Or rather, he should be used to meet them by now.

Zorn and Thorn were there, stuck in a fight against the same party Zidane had fought in the Ice Cavern and Burmecia.

When the jester resigned to their defeat and they escaped upstairs, the party abandoned them when they discovered that they were being observed by the tailed boy further away. They seemed to know the Princess was somewhere around here, and Zidane was standing in their path. Ready to fight him off, the group lost no time.

“You!” Captain Steiner shouted, his sword pointing at the boy who immediately rushed toward the group.

The clashes of their blades shined in the dark hall. Zidane quickly dodged what should have been a fatal strike if he hadn’t bounced backward, only to meet the spear of the Burmecian dragoon he remembered as Freya. Ducking all the stabbing from her spear, Zidane tried reaching for the woman with his daggers until he saw some pointy icicles flying

to his direction. Abandoning the woman, he rolled himself to the side, avoiding the deadly Blizzaga that had come from the tiny Black Mage he knew as Vivi. Before he noticed it, he received on his arm a slash that came from the Tantalus young man he recalled as Blank.

As the battle raged and carried on without any progress for both party, Zidane was starting to sense the signs of exhaustion. This was a fight of one against four skilled fighters, and despite being created as an Angel of Death, Zidane was still a mortal with limits of his own. In his last straw to get some rest, he leapt on a high pillar, where he thought to be safe for few instants with enough time to apply some healing potions from the injuries he had sustained.

Except he did not expect Freya to join him on the same spot. As a dragoon warrior, jumping high to where Zidane stood was no problem for her. Thanks to Zidane's short distraction, the trained Burmecian showed no mercy and hesitation as she stabbed him, straight to the stomach before taking her bloodied spear out of him.

Zidane bathed in a pool of his own blood.

Trying to contain his pain by taming the scream that wanted to come out, Zidane caught his bleeding stomach with his hands. Unable to hold himself, a low and long growl exited his throat as blood soon escape from his lips. His hands could not block the torrent of blood that came out from his injury. Falling to his knees, he crouched with his arms covering his stomach, but the loss of blood and the pain were such the strength of his shaking limbs and legs were slowly giving up. In his weak composure, the rest of his body followed the fall to the flat ground below him, the landing splashing the blood up to the border of the pillar, where the crimson liquid flowed down.

Satisfied, the Burmecian woman turned her back at him without a word, never giving a glance at the tailed boy who had murdered her kin.

While death had yet to claim him, the only thought that crossed his mind right now was one of the sole people he knew to truly love him.

"***Kuuu… jaa…***"

…

"***Zidane? What's the matter?***" Kuja responded in his telepathic link, worried over the weak call from

his brother.

Thankfully, Kuja had not gone to Cleyra. His excuse for this was to let the Queen relish on this petty little thing called war for herself as it was not his to enjoy as a mere servant of the royal family. No, for him, murdering things with his own hands was the way to go. Mass killings were not as fun, especially when he only got to watch it from distance.

But unlike with that incident from the Ice Cavern, Kuja had not waited for his brother's response to take action. Even if he waited, he was quite assured he will not get an answer. Zidane's weak call seemed to have given the young man some pain to the heart, as if he could experience Zidane's suffering. Where was the young brat, anyway? He could be anywhere, but his brother being a very predictable boy, Kuja expected to find him in the dungeon still close to the Princess he loved. Zidane was incorrigible, anyway. Kuja was not sure what had happened to him, but something happened, for certain.

So many unanswered questions and naught for answers.

Using the secret passage to reach the extraction hall where the ceremony took place, Kuja opened

the door, close to the now emptied altar. Just as Zidane advised, no body lied on it and no trace of blood was found. So, the Princess really had not been killed yet, at least on the altar, though he couldn’t tell where she had gone and who took her. Nevertheless, it was not a concern to worry about. No one else stood in the hall and he saw the flickering dying flames and the light fading. No other sound than the fire on the torches were heard, and the strange quietness led his way. This silence crept him somehow like he was about to meet his doom or something worse in this empty place.

As he ran around calling his brother, the further he distanced from the altar, another sound were picked by his ears, a noise that was sounding more… organic.

Heavy breathings that were not his own.

This was strange. The breathings came from above… the pillar besides him?

Slowly, Kuja climbed the large pillar which, thankfully, was provided with a ladder. Dreading for what was to come, he realized the scent of blood became more prominent the higher he climbed.

Then he saw it.

A furred blond tail, leaking blood.

The story from the Ice Cavern repeated itself.

“Zidane?!” Kuja called out of shock like he wanted to scream, but it came out low and coarse. The sight before him revealed quite a horrifying spectacle.

Zidane’s eyes suddenly shined with life at the call. His head lying to the side, he was allowed to catch a small glimpse of his brother’s silhouette, unable to get a clear vision of Kuja but some blurs and colors along with the muffled voices. His brain no longer processed well the information he’d been receiving from his surrounding and he sensed his life slowly slipping away.

Kuja wasted no more time. Keeping his calm, he casted his most powerful Curaga spell. Thanks to his fast instincts, Zidane’s injury on his arm and his stomach stitched themselves with the soothing white magic, stopping the massive flow of blood. However, while this might have saved him from a pending end, this did not put the boy back to his feet as it will take his body some time to recover from the loss of blood.

The older Genome despised to dirty himself, but dirt was the least of his concerns when his sole family was at his feet, soaking in crimson red. Kneeling by Zidane and staining himself with his blood all over his clothes when he picked him up, Kuja frantically but carefully placed him beneath his arms, trying to raise his head so they could give each other a gaze.

As the blur of his vision shifted to sharpness, Zidane finally got a good look into Kuja's softened eyes. The boy saw how his older brother was trying to calm his anxiety from his facial expression, but Kuja's shaking blue pupils disclosed the fear under.

Kuja was afraid to lose Zidane.

"You're alive…" the boy whispered weakly with a smile that took him the world to maintain.

Once again, Zidane was more concerned over Kuja's life than his own.

A pang of guilt hit Kuja so hard…

"T… They took G… Garnet… right?" Zidane struggled to say, but Kuja put a finger to his lips.

"Don't say anything," Kuja hushed, and Zidane listened. The boy stopped fighting his pain and he

found comfort in his brother’s arms where he let his heavy lids seal themselves.

When Kuja returned to the throne room with an unconscious Zidane in his arms, a commotion happened before his shocked eyes. Strangers who he did not recognize except for Captain Steiner stood exhausted after a long fight that had left them helpless. On the Queen’s personal bench, the sleeping Princess flickered her eyes open thanks to Beatrix’s lifting spell, much to Kuja’s surprise.

How was that mere Gaian General able to lift that powerful curse he had casted upon the Princess?

As Princess Garnet woke up, Beatrix turned her sword to the tailed young noblemen. She’d been alarmed by the enormous stains of blood drenched on Kuja’s attire as he was holding his unconscious little sibling, but she quickly tossed the thought aside. What had happened to the brothers was a trivial matter to her duties. “So, the Queen has really ordered the Princess executed,” the General said to the man who appeared the least surprised by her sayings, confirming the fears of her Queen’s betrayal.

“Oh, but you are Alexandria’s greatest General,” Kuja replied, a sneer escaping when he couldn’t stop that wicked smile from forming. “Should the Queen order her dear daughter’s execution, then you will have to comply, Milady.”

Frowning further at the man, Beatrix walked to him, her sword still directed at him. “I am loyal to Alexandria, yes. Yet, murdering her own innocent daughter is no Alexandrian’s duty. It is madness, simple as that. I have sworn my life to protect the royal family and the country, which Princess Garnet is part of. To me, my choice is set. Queen Brahne has betrayed her country and I can no longer fight on her madness’s behalf.”

“Oh?” the young man exclaimed and then he laughed. “So, the massacre of the innocent Burmecians and the Cleyrans is not madness to you? Did you not question your loyalty back then? If you allow me to apologize for your idiocy, my dear Beatrix, I can only confirm that you are no better than these empty war vessels your Queen adores so much. Did you just suddenly gain a soul of your own?”

“Silence!” the General screamed as she swung her sword at the nobleman, but Kuja dodged the

attack by pushing her away with a much more powerful Firaga spell, propelling her to the ground in a loud metallic clang of her armor.

Walking to the General while still hauling his brother over his soaked shoulder, with a smug on his lips, the tailed young man said, “How can you attack me without warning when I have my dying innocent little brother over me? Are you even capable of mercy? Are your imprudence and insolence the reasons why Queen Brahne had made you General?”

“Innocent little brother?! I… I have no mercy for this dangerous boy!” Beatrix cried out as she struggled to stand after the firing blow. “This Monkey Boy was ordered to execute the Princess!”

“And yet, your cherished Princess is still alive and completely clean of blood,” Kuja carried on as he walked away toward the exit, and Beatrix grew silent. “My poor brother Zidane. He had plenty of times to get Princess Garnet executed. You, General Beatrix, should know this more than anyone. After all, your spies’ reports on my little sibling and I certainly informed you well how Zidane should have no problem to ‘murder’. So, tell me. After having been left for hours with the Princess, why hasn’t Zidane murdered her yet?”

Beatrix froze. For all these years of spying and reports, Kuja had been aware they were being observed. How he knew this was something she might never get an answer for, but this meant the Tailed Brothers weren't simple noble folks.

Kuja maintained his wide smile. "Yet, on the contrary to your beloved Princess, my dear brother bathes in cold blood. Why, do you think?"

"C-Cold blood?" the Burmecian warrior snarled out like the rage growing inside suddenly gave her the boost needed to get up. "Your 'innocent' brother was one of those who murdered my kin in cold blood and he attacked us first when we came for the Princess!"

Everyone but the still wakening Princess were about to attack the silver-haired man before a blaring crash was heard from the exit. A horde of horrid, giant Bandersnatches burst in the throne room, growling at the group. "Oh, here are the Queen's lovely pets," Kuja laughed. "I trust they will take a good care of you all. But nevertheless, look at the time. I am chatting too much. I leave you with the fun of playing with them."

As the group came to be too busy to keep up with the large feral monsters to run after Kuja, the young

man walked by a barely conscious Princess who was still dazed with what was happening in the room. He gazed upon his unconscious young brother before giving him a brush to the hair with his fingers.

An idea came to him.

Kuja turned to the Princess and exclaimed, “If I am obliged, my little canary, I can no longer hold my tongue. This secret has been haunting my dreams for years, and I am pleased to share this with the world. Zidane is your father’s murderer.”

When the Princess finally processed her thoughts and realized what the man had been telling her, Kuja chuckled again and escaped, never leaving Zidane from his arms. Instead, he left the group to deal with the Bandersnatches.

Author’s note*: Another change from the canon is that Garnet knows that her mother is responsible for the attack on Burmecia. I mean, it’s common sense. Oh yeah, and Kuja’s the one who comes at the end instead of the Queen. Let’s say the Queen is still busy with the attack in Cleyra.*

This chapter was so hard to write, and I'm glad to be done with it.

Chapter 18: Confusion

I admit my free time for this chapter has been greatly reduced due to my job schedule and some real-life restrictions, so I apologize about this.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 18: Confusion

The wind and the cold welcomed him during his awakening. It was only when his vision began to sharpen that he discovered he was not on the ground, but on the comfort of their Silver Dragon companion's furred back. Soaring over the wide ocean, he looked up to see the gentle gaze of his brother whose lips now formed a warming smile.

And despite the comfort of the instant, his entire body beneath ached like burning, twisting fleshes.

"Don't move," Kuja hushed to Zidane before he offered him few soft strokes on the hair. "You've been severely injured, but you'll recover in no time if you don't move much. Besides, there's nothing you can do much right now except to wait for Mahila to lead us back home."

Moving his gaze away from his sibling, Zidane observed the emptiness of the ocean, letting the fur of their Silver Dragon flicking around his lying body. “Fine,” Zidane said with a groan before he grasped at the sudden pain from having spoken even lightly. Letting time progress, the pain subdued as he stopped moving and speaking. He reverted to their connected minds instead. “***I don’t remember what happened… I just recall that Tantalus man Blank, Rusty, the Black Mage prototype Vivi and that Burmecian dragoon Freya. The Burmecian stabbed me, and then I thought I was going to die.***”

“***You would’ve been, if I hadn’t found you in time,***” Kuja replied with an ounce of exasperation manifesting. “***You need to stop being reckless or you’ll lose your status as an Angel of Death.***”

“***Oh yeah? Since when do you even care about being an Angel of Death? I thought you despise that old man who had created us and shoved us that silly angel designation.***”

Kuja gazed up to the horizon in a wise silence. Suddenly, he left a giggle. “***Are you not going to thank me for saving you?***”

To this, Zidane weakly smiled back. “***Sorry. Thanks, Kuja.***”

What a way to divert the subject. However, Zidane's curiosity had no end and he wanted to bring back the subject of what had happened to the Princess, to him and even to the others back in Alexandria while he was in the unfortunate state of unconsciousness. How exactly did Kuja manage to save him despite all the commotion in the castle to save the Princess?

And giving another glare at his brother, he noticed how Kuja's whole attire was drenched of blood, certainly his own blood from the injury he had sustained from Freya.

"***Please tell me what happened in the castle,***" Zidane requested.

Like he'd been prepared for the answer, Kuja didn't hesitate with a reply. "***Nothing much. The group I supposed you had fought to near death took the Princess with them while they left you to die. I heard your call, so I used the secret passage to reach the altar room where I discovered you dying and then, I healed you. As I brought you back to the surface, I saw the group who had just been defeated by General Beatrix. I supposed she fought them, thinking they were enemies to Alexandria from what you told me with her***

encounter in Burmecia. However, she found out the Queen truly wanted the Princess executed and that the group wanted her protection, so she allied with the group and turned against her Queen to save the Princess. And then, they turned against me as I was trying to get you out to safety. I fought them a little before the Queen's Bandersnatches came running around and fought the group. Thanks to them, I escaped with Mahila and here we are."

"***That seems a lot to process for 'Nothing much',***" Zidane let him know without flinching from his pose, like a bored boy.

"***But there is one last thing you should know,***" Kuja added, and this time, there seemed to be a strain in the thought.

"***Okay, tell me.***"

"***Princess Garnet knows we killed her father.***"

Zidane's laid off stance suddenly stiffened. This was a shock so great it triggered a pain of both physical and emotional natures inside his body. While Zidane tensed with anxiousness, Kuja had not reacted to his own statement. He must have been prepared to tell his little brother this sad truth. "H-

How does she k-know…” Zidane forced himself to say, verbally this time, though it came out like a stuttering whisper. To appease the boy, Kuja gently put up a finger on his lips. Taming his edginess, Zidane complied with silence once more.

For a long moment, Kuja contemplated the sky in complete quietness too, deep in thoughts. When he looked serene on the outset, from the depth of his heart, a pain ached from within.

He couldn’t admit the entire truth, no. Kuja was not going to admit that the main reason for having revealed the answer to their crimes of murdering the King was Zidane’s melting heart. Kuja could sense it, Zidane’s softening heart to the Princess he had refused to kill when he’d have no problem killing another Gaian. He had witnessed the same scene when Zidane let one of his kidnappers live after having been exposed to that man’s kindness. Zidane coveted people’s kindness, whether they were Terran, Gaians or anything. This was a big problem to Kuja’s goals. Was Zidane’s innocence part of Garland’s plan for his Angel of Death?

And this was the very reason he needed Princess Garnet to know the truth. He had to provoke inside her heart a great hatred for Zidane. She had to know

that her friend was her father's murderer. With this truth revealed, there should be no way the Princess will ever be able to forgive Zidane for having murdered the King in cold blood. It was the only way to make sure no one else but himself will be able to manipulate the younger Genome to his will.

Still…

Was this really what Kuja wished?

He had no care to manipulate the others to his will or what will happen to them as a result of his twisted actions. However, the idea of knowing he had been manipulating everything around Zidane's life knocked a pain to the heart.

No, he could not let Zidane know the truth of his wicked actions.

"***I overheard General Beatrix speaking of her suspicions when she came back to Alexandria,***" Kuja half-lied. Truth be told, he did hear her speak of it once years ago, and yet her statements had never been confirmed. "***She had made her own investigation and when she saw you on Mahila's back in Burmecia, she knew you committed the crime since, you know, you made the world believe that a dragon had devoured the King.***"

His brother's reveal was able to bring relief to the boy and his body's stance softened. Unsure what to add to this, Zidane stared down, looking at nothing but the vastness of the unchanging ocean. Deceived by his own reckless move to have called their Silver Dragon in the raining city, the boy said, "***I see. I'm sorry. I've been so dumb. I shouldn't have called her in front of everyone.***" He paused, taking a moment to swallow as his eyes half-shut with a hint of sadness within. "***Garnet probably hates me for good, now.***"

"***Don't worry about it,***" the elder sibling said. Not very surprising, Kuja smiled, not seemingly concerned with Zidane's 'mistake' like it had been part of his plan. "***We don't need the Queen anymore. The war in Burmecia and Cleyra was the catalyst we need from her to prolong this genocide over Gaia. We gave her the Princess's Eidolons, and she will probably go after Lindblum and then the rest of the world. However, it should be easy for us to claim the Eidolons once again. We will only need her to summon one of these legends upon us, and then, if everything goes accordingly…***"

"***Then you're going to use the Invincible to project a special frequency that will bend the Eidolons to your will.***"

Content to get his comment completed by his brother, Kuja laughed. Zidane was right. A time ago, Kuja had requested Garland to modify a part of the Invincible to make it possible to use special frequencies the Summoners used to control their summoned legends. "***I see you've learned well. Using this newly added feature won't waste its energy as much as destroying an entire town, so we will be able to use it several times. With the Eidolons on our sides, we can bring Gaia to ruins and then rule over it. We will prove Master Garland that he'd been wrong about us the entire time. He will regret having created us to do his biddings!***"

Kuja's uplifting comment did not bring the effect he wished on his little brother. Zidane sulked and commented, "***And you don't seem to care that Garnet despises me now.***"

The rest of their trip progressed in complete silence.

Few days far from Alexandria and the Mist Continent had been helping the tailed boy to move on from his old life of love and struggle. To add, he

had recovered from his incident in the castle and he was back at full strength.

It was a pity to be unable to return home in Treno. As the Princess and possibly the Queen knew the truth of the father's and husband's death, it would not surprise him that the rest of the Gaians on the Mist Continent were after the Tailed Brothers' heads. To be wanted across so many areas in this world will limit their movements.

Having learned of the Princess's companions exploit of saving her and having survived many hardships on their way, Kuja predicted these gifted Gaians were investigating on the brothers' whereabout. Witnesses had certainly seen them going to the North with their Silver Dragon. It was also a common knowledge among Treno citizens that the brothers travelled with her from times to times, always heading North. The group will try to reach the mysterious continent to the North in order to find them. If everything went well for them, they will know about the origins of the Black Mages, the Queen's main tools for this war, being the Mist. And to get rid of the Mist, they will have to find the source itself. Plethora of hints about the Tailed Brothers' hidden spot were scattered on the Outer Continent and the Princess and her friends will come

for them. They will eventually reach for the Iifa Tree.

But Kuja still needed the Mist to fuel his plans. This byproduct of lost Gaian souls must remain on Gaia.

And if the Princess knew of the brothers' whereabouts, then perhaps the Queen will follow. She might know the truth of King Alexander's death and she will be after them. With the Queen having Eidolons in her hands, even if Kuja had the perfect plan, things might not go as envisaged for him.

Yet, for now, all the brothers could do was to wait for the group to come in their lair.

Having become bored of their days, the Genome brothers found their ways to pass time. Kuja spent most of his hours in the stationed Hilda Garde I, checking upon their prisoner and bragging every now and then about his mastermind plans and his life. He made sure Hilda felt at home, to which she learned to accept as a part of her now boring, sheltered life. Zidane would rather go outside and explore the nearby lands with Mahila's companionship. He hadn't had much occasion to visit the surrounding world of their home in the desert without Kuja on his back. Without him this

time, things felt different and perhaps a little more exciting. As advised by Kuja, the boy and the Silver Dragon had taken the decision to visit the Iifa Tree sometimes, spying on anything out of place to see if there will ever be a group of Gaians from the Mist Continent around there.

Today, as they soared over a dead forest, something caught his attention.

A sudden light of greenery flashed from below.

Curious, Zidane requested the Silver Dragon to land where the dead trees had suddenly become lively and green. The greenery had vanished already by the time they landed, but Zidane explored a bit just to see what could have caused the light. There was something off around, like a magic power drew him to one direction in the dead forest. As he took slow steps, the magic grew stronger, and at one point, a world of illusion faded where the entire surrounding around him flashed into a scene of lush green trees and lively birds flying around.

What a new world it was, all hidden beneath an illusory dead forest.

A small village appeared in this spring weather area, surrounded by lively trees and roaming

animals. People walked in, spoke and laughed around, all in their own comfort in the middle of this illusion. It was a normal, happy and small village like he'd find on the Mist continent.

However, the people living there were not all kinds of people.

They were all Black Mages.

Sentient, self-aware, happy Black Mages, not minding that the rest of the world was at war, not bothered that they were in the middle of nowhere, far from everything.

Just like that little Black Mage Vivi.

Finding a bush where he could hide and spy, Zidane observed them and tried listening and focusing on whatever they were discussing about. Oddly enough, they were speaking of all kinds of casual subjects which he deemed childish; from the games they began to play, from how a certain No. 288 always sounded sad, or from that chocobo egg a "stopping" mother bird had left them to take care of.

Were these Black Mages part of those who had vanished and escaped months ago? How did they get that far from Alexandria and how did they even cross the ocean to reach the Outer Continent?

And more importantly, like Vivi, how did they gain a soul?

Nevertheless, despite the spiritual powers he sensed from them, Zidane deemed them too innocent in character to be a threat to their plans. It'd be wiser to leave them by and not bother them, for now. However, maybe he should let a word slip to Kuja about them later. These Black Mages might come as a good use to the brothers as they no longer had access to their factory in Dali to create more servants.

…

Leaving the sentient Black Mages in their casual lives, Zidane continued his trip to the Iifa Tree. Thankfully, Mahila knew the way to the tree by heart, having flied alone to the area more than a couple of times since several groups of Silver Dragons hung around the giant tree. It had become an oddity for Zidane to never see Mahila coming back to them with a mate or an egg ready. He'd often joke with her that she should find a mate sooner or later. He'd also try to convince her to tell her kin to not attack the brothers whenever they wandered around the Iifa Tree area. However, Kuja had taught Zidane that communication between

Silver Dragons did not work the same way as they knew it. At least, staying around Mahila was their best way to protect themselves from the other wild dragons as her projected scent and pheromones indicated that she was part of their species.

After landing on the soil of the Iifa Tree, Zidane explored the surrounding, trying to find some hints of newcomers from the Mist Continent or spy on things. Unfortunately, nothing seemed out of the ordinary, so he chose to rest around instead of spending the hours to return home in the desert. After all, Mahila needed her rest too after having flied for long hours and it was getting late, anyhow. After finding a tranquil spot in a nearby wood, both Silver Dragon and young Genome hit slumber.

When Zidane woke up the next morning, he faced a pleasant surprise with the fresh corpse of a Griffin that Mahila had brought him. Well, how convenient to have some food ready since he had not been eating since yesterday noon. While he started cutting parts of the monster with a dagger, he suddenly missed the easy life he had led with Kuja on the Mist Continent as noblemen. If Kuja was with him right now, he'd create a fire out of wood with a Fire spell and they'd cook the meat over the crackling flames. As Zidane was incapable of

producing fire from simple rocks and branches, he'll have to settle for raw meat, much to the Silver Dragon's contentment who could share the food as if she'd been devouring things with her dragon kin. After their improvised lunch, they restarted their patrol around the Iifa Tree.

At last, Zidane discovered what he had sought for since they had left Alexandria. Kuja was right.

The Princess and her companions were exploring the Outer Continent, maybe in a thorough search of the brothers.

How their party reached the continent will remain an unanswered question, but that answer was a frivolous detail right now. What mattered was that they were coming for the brothers and perhaps they knew where to find the origin of the Mist if they were hanging around the Iifa Tree.

Yet, he was not going to allow them to stop the Mist.

Because he knew of the group's insane potential, he had to be careful. He was not going to risk his Silver Dragon's life, and he asked Mahila to fly away, which she did. Hiding from bush to bush as the group made its progress toward the trunk of the

Iifa Tree, he spied on the group, careful to not be found.

Thus, he made a startling discovery.

A small girl with a horn on her forehead walked among them.

Not only this, but he felt the tremendous amount of spiritual energy flowing through her, just as much as Princess Garnet who seemed to have mastered a new kind of Eidolon.

How? How could there be another Summoner alive? Besides Garnet who they never got to know how she had lost her Summoner horn and how she had escaped the disaster ten years ago, how did this little Summoner girl exist? Zidane and Kuja could have sworn they were all extinct. Where did this girl come from? Had there been other survivors who had emerged from the ravage?

Nevertheless, the detail remained. That girl had natural Eidolons within her, all different from the ones Garnet used to possess. Zidane still despised these spiritual legends, but if Kuja kept dreaming of getting them for his own and that the Queen’s ones were out of their reach for now, they could always get the ones from this horned girl instead…

If the idea pleased Kuja, then Zidane will put his hatred for them aside.

Well, this should be easy. He will simply capture this girl and bring her to his brother, as long as she won't cast her Eidolons at him. Until then, he wanted to keep her existence a surprise.

This might be a difficult capture, though. The group appeared to put a particular focus on this little girl. Perhaps this was to protect any of their younger companions, like their Black Mage Vivi. As they walked forward the only way by foot to reach the Iifa Tree's trunk, when they hit a hidden, invisible wall blocking their way, the Summoner girl began a strange prayer before flashes of light flickered. Zidane sensed a magic seal being broken with a newly acquired Eidolon to the girl. From his understanding, it seemed there had been an Eidolon guarding the path to the Iifa Tree. How weird, Zidane had never noticed it from all his past trips to the Iifa Tree, but he had never taken that path before, so that might explain why that Eidolon went undiscovered for so long…

He continued to observe the party as they ran on the exposed roots to the trunk, and he realized the child kept her steps closer to the Tantalus man

Blank. There seemed to be a one-sided affinity with him, like she had a childish crush on him. With Blank around her, attempting to capture the girl was a “no” for now.

Listening to their discussion, Zidane learned the name of the Summoner.

Eiko. What a strange name.

He followed the group until they reached to the elevator room that led to the bottom of the giant tree, which none knew how to operate, except Zidane. Of course, he was not going to let them know the secret behind this Terran technology. As the group gathered around the magical lift, each tried their own actions to power on this elevator, from magical spells to physical contacts with it, and yet none of them found the solution.

From his distance, Zidane tried finding a moment where he could capture the child, but she always remained in the middle of the group. If that was the case, he might have to rely on brute force to get her. He could knock her down, catch her under his arms and escape by jumping from root to root until he joined Mahila.

Don’t be reckless, Kuja would always tell him. Zidane knew these simple, yet wise words should be followed, but it was so hard for him to control these urges to unleash his continuously growing energy from the inside. He needed action. He felt like he wanted to attack things and do the reckless things that Kuja forbade him to do. Yet, these things always granted him some satisfaction from within. Maybe today will be different! Maybe he will be able to take on the group again, and perhaps he will win today!

But before he could even act out of instincts, Garnet gasped as she spotted him. This time, she had not waited for his reaction. She was no longer afraid and she casted a spell over him. It didn’t take any more instant to realize that his lids were growing heavy and his mind was turning numb. Soon, his consciousness left him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was on the same spot just before he abruptly fell asleep. However, he discovered he could not move much. His entire body and limbs were tightly attached with solid ropes, making his escape unlikely. Around, the

group had him surrounded, with Blank poking him with a stick and tease visible in his near hidden eyes.

“Hey!” Zidane hissed out loud before he growled at the Tantalus young man who bounced back from the shock, closer to the Princess who watched the scene with her stern look. Vivi and Eiko stood behind her like they were scared of him.

“Guess the Monkey Boy’s awake!” Blank mocked, his grin wider.

Zidane did not answer the remark. After struggling to get on a sitting position, he was busy projecting his hatred on that young man, and yet his growls and fury immediately stopped when Garnet began to approach him in steady, slow steps. The fire in her eyes implied that she wasn’t going to have a small talk with him.

Watching her appeased him… until he was rewarded with a strong slap on his face, enough to pack some punch. The boy landed on the ground from his sitting position, his shoulders hitting the hard ground first. Wincing in pain, Zidane shut his eyes before he looked at the Princess again, almost afraid to see the rage from her.

“Why?”

Despite the rising anger in her voice and stance, she remained calm when asking the one-word question that must mean everything to her. Yet, the clueless Zidane blinked, his gaze glued to her while still trying to process the question he had been shoved with by his past crush. “What?” he replied as he was trying to sit back with these ropes.

“Why did you kill my father?” Garnet asked, her voice not changing from her previous question and her eyes never shedding a tear.

Zidane could see it in her stance and her eyes. The emotion bursting from inside was killing her, and her hatred for him had been increasing stronger than ever. Princess Garnet detested him now.

So, Kuja had been telling him the truth. Garnet knew Zidane’s vile crime from six years ago. The boy could not pull himself to confirm or deny her claim. The silence he was manifesting right now was enough to confirm his guilt.

But Zidane never regretted killing the King. This was futile to ask for her forgiveness or gain her trust once again. Garnet could no longer trust Zidane, just as Zidane could no longer trust Garnet.

This was his fate. Every Gaians hated him. Zidane only had Kuja and Mahila in his life now.

Somehow, he was no longer bothered by all this hatred toward him, because he had successfully escaped the love that had become an obstacle to his life. At last, he was free.

He couldn’t help but smile.

“Where is your brother?” Garnet demanded, keeping up with her authoritarian tone, knowing Zidane was not going to comply with her question regarding her late father. This discussion was going nowhere.

Zidane’s smile had now turned twisted with full of malevolence. “Not going to tell you,” he said, his grin showing his baring teeth.

“Dagger, it’s useless!” Blank protested to the Princess. “Speaking to him like this is like speaking to a wall!”

Dagger. Was this a nickname Garnet had adopted from her companions?

“Dagger…” Zidane whispered to himself, satisfied in some sick way. “What a nice name. Is

that a tribute to the weapon that had claimed your father's life?"

"Shut up!" Blank shouted at him. He couldn't hold his temper anymore. Out of frustration, he kicked Zidane in the stomach, prompting a short cry and a splash of blood to surge out of his throat. Only Garnet was able to stop Blank from doing further damage to the tailed boy.

"Blank, that's enough!" the Princess shouted after the young man, this time, carrying with that authoritarian tone she had reserved for Zidane at Blank instead. A tone worthy of a world's ruler. Stumped by the Princess's calm despite her amplifying voice, Blank took few steps back and decided that Garnet, or rather Dagger, should deal with everything in her hands. The young woman came closer to the fallen tailed young man who hadn't swept that smile away from his face.

"Zidane," she began, more neutral and calmer now. "We heard reports of a Silver Dragon going back and forth in Treno, always heading to the North. We also heard from the Dwarves of Conde Petie of another Silver Dragon crossing the sky above sometimes, always heading to some 'Sanctuary'. Beatrix's messengers spoke of a Silver

Dragon with you in Burmecia. From all the eyewitnesses we have met, we suspect that the dragon they saw is your Silver Dragon and that this ‘Sanctuary’ has some high importance to you. We heard rumors of the source of the Mist coming from this ‘Sanctuary’, which is the ‘Iifa Tree’. Are you following?”

Zidane listened, but he did not say anything. He just offered her a sigh, like Garnet’s speech bored him. She continued, “We suspect the Mist is the source of the production of Black Mages, thanks to all the Mist found in the Dali factory. By stopping the Mist, which we think comes from beneath the tree’s trunk, we will stop the production of Black Mages, and my mother will no longer have any more of these living weapons for herself. We know you and your brother know something about the source of the Mist, so will you lead us there, Zidane?”

Still feeling the pain from the earlier kick in the stomach, Zidane could only stare at the Princess without thinking of anything. Even by giving her that long stare, his love for her seemed to have been lost for good like he was unable to recall the last time he had ever sensed some attraction for her. Even her endearing appearance had now turned into an ugly thing which he wished he could wipe out of

his existence. He was not going to let her know the tree's secret. He was not going to tell them that only he and Kuja had the key to the bottom of this hellish underground.

Or rather, they *were* the keys.

Not surprised by Zidane's reluctance to speak, Garnet, or rather Dagger, turned away, not looking back at him and no longer sure how to convince him to talk. Not really interested by Zidane's reaction to all this, Blank began to protest. "Dagger, we should get rid of him! Dammit, he murdered your father in cold blood when he was a child! His brother and he had probably murdered many others since they've been able to walk! They are the devils! He's not going to have a change of heart anytime soon! He's not helping us and he's too dangerous to keep around!"

Yet, Zidane noticed the weak shivers on Dagger while she had her back facing him. She rose her head, deep in thoughts, her hands turning into shaking fists. "Zidane… saved my life once," she said, her tone turning softer but there were some strains in her voice. Sure, Zidane became momently shocked to hear these gentle words coming from her. Even though he had begged her to not tell a word

about him saving her six years ago, he had taken for granted that she had forgotten about the event, being a Princess and everything. “Even if he had saved me by killing my assailants in cold blood, I… I have been so grateful for his presence that… I have fallen in love with him since that day.”

…

Time had stopped.

Zidane could no longer process his thoughts. In the span of less than a second, the girl he utterly hated to death had become the girl of his dreams once again. He had his suspicion of her love ever since she had asked him to keep in touch with her, literally, but he’d been so much a coward by escaping her demands and by believing into whatever Kuja had claimed for years. No, this was all the opposite of what Kuja had made him believe.

She doesn’t like you, Kuja would tell him all the time. He would tell him this when Zidane began to soften to Gaians, to her. Kuja would remind him of this the moments Zidane strayed away from his older brother’s path, just to let him know that he was different, a mere Genome, an Angel of Death from another world created by a mad old man to achieve

his own goals. A puppet, a vessel, this was all Zidane was to Kuja and Garland.

Had Kuja lied to him his entire life? How could Zidane have been so blinded by Kuja's tells and oblivious to Garnet's needs for years?

For his entire sixteen years of existence, he had been adhered to the idea that only Kuja and Mahila were capable of giving him the love and affection that made him feel like an individual, a person. Right now, this belief was proven wrong. But now, he knew. Garnet didn't love him anymore, she loathed him and she won't ever be going to forgive him for the murder of the father she had loved and adored.

All because of Kuja. He had been lied to, he had been manipulated, Zidane was certain of this, and a fury began to grow from beneath his heart.

Why? Why had everything in his life led to a world where he had been his brother's shadow, a place where he had been created for destruction? Was this how the old man had programmed him? Why was he created to kill? Why couldn't have he been born like all the others and thrive with a normal life?

Yet, whatever ran across his mind, it was too late to go back and admitted his love for her. It was the end for him, and that reality and confusion triggered a sudden need to cry.

But now, he must not show any sign of weakness in front of these Gaians. After all, he had been thrusted in their world with the role of the antagonist in this twisted play.

“You… You want to reach the bottom of the tree?”

If Zidane will never be able to undo his life’s mistakes, then the least he could do was to help the Princess right now.

Surprised to hear Zidane speak, the group turned to him, giving him a long, confused stare. They noticed that Zidane’s earlier wicked grin had vanished, leaving the place to a stern, serious-looking sulk. Satisfied that all were listening, the tailed boy continued, “You’ve been looking at this ‘lift’ for some time.” His cold smile returned to him but it was no longer vile with malicious intentions. “You won’t be able to make it work. None of you will.”

“What are you insinuating?!” Blank stepped forward in a fury but Zidane was not startled by the young man’s rising temper.

“Relax,” Zidane huffed with a laugh, all calmly, and Blank took a long breath in to quiet himself. “This is a special lift that will only respond to me or my brother.”

Dagger’s expression softened at Zidane’s sudden will to help them, but she knew she could not free him of the ropes now. When she was about to open her mouth to speak, Eiko, the Summoner child, interrupted her. “Huh? But why?” she asked the tailed young man.

“Because… I don’t know?” Zidane admitted and he chuckled at his dumb words. “Maybe it’s because Kuja and I were created special?”

It was time for the small Black Mage Vivi to react to Zidane’s strange choice of words. “Created?” he pondered with a visible puzzled stare.

But Zidane ignored him. “I will lead you to Soulcage at the bottom of the tree,” he revealed. Once again, the party was left into a greater confusion.

“Soulcage?” Dagger questioned him.

“The producer of the Mist,” Zidane answered.

So, the rumors were right. To be gifted with a knowledge known to no one from Gaia, Zidane must come from another world. Where did the Monkey Boy come from, anyway? Was this a world full of malevolent, strong tailed “humans” too?

Blank stepped in before the Princess like he’d been trying to protect her. “We can’t trust him!” he begged her, and the small Summoner child and Vivi eyed each other in agreement. “What if he’s lying?”

Dagger seemed to sound convinced already, but she had to convince her peers now. “If the source of the Mist is truly beyond this lift that only responds to Zidane’s presence, then there’s only one way to see if he’s telling us the truth.”

Making certain that the tailed young man was not going to struggle against her, Dagger slowly made her approach toward her former friend and she waited. Zidane did not appear like he was going to rebut or anything, except that he stared at her while keeping himself mute. He was not sure what kind of ideas ran through Dagger’s mind until she crouched to poke his tail, causing some shivers across his skin, the fur of his appendage to bristle and his whole body to freeze for a second.

“Is it… alright if I pull you with your tail?” the uncomfortable young woman requested him, a bit concerned of his wellbeing.

Still mute, Zidane nodded. With his go, Dagger pulled him with his furred appendage and dragged him to where the lift awaited. And just as Zidane had affirmed, as soon as his tail touched the lift, a halo of light surrounded the platform before it lowered itself to the depth of the underground.

It seemed the lift part was the truth, at least.

“See? Told you!” Zidane exclaimed as his grin spread wider like he was proud of helping. Blank grumbled at him. “Untie me, and I’ll help you!”

“Should w-we really do this?” Vivi came to say, all shy and doubtful.

“I trust Zidane for now,” Dagger commented, her fists on her hips. “We have no choice. If everything works with his presence, having him tied all the way down will be a very exhausting chore as we will have to carry his weight.”

Without following Blank and Vivi’s warnings, Dagger borrowed a small knife and cut the ropes binding Zidane prisoner. The tailed young man immediately stood on his feet with few stretches of

the body and the rest of his limbs. Going all defensive, Blank and the two children took their weapons out.

Not shocked by their defensive moves, Zidane gave them a glare before he laughed at them. “I’m not going to attack you, sheesh!” the Monkey Boy exclaimed with his folded arms. “I might be a cold-blooded murderer to you, but I hold true to my words!”

When the lift came back, they all stood together on the platform, with Zidane joining them last. Soon, they were led to the dark underground where only weak, natural lights from giant spider web-like threads and bright, withering flowers showed them the path to a deeper underground. This new strange world filled with magic and undead creatures felt so alien and amazing at the same time that Eiko and Dagger stopped for few moments to gaze at these wonders of nature. Of course, Zidane was not going to tell them these were nothing but the fruits of the Terran technology and magic. With the monsters that had made this paradisiac hell their home attacking them, thanks to Zidane’s knowledge of this place on how to deal with the undead monsters with healing magic, their adventure progressed like a breeze.

For the whole time on their way to the deeper undergrounds, except for the undead advices, Zidane had not spoken a word with the group. As long as the party followed him, all was good. However, Zidane overheard a serious discussion between Dagger and Blank behind his back during their long descent on the last giant elevator to where Soulcage resided.

“Do you intend on keeping him in the group after all this?” Blank asked Dagger.

“Yes, I intend to bring him the justice he deserves.”

“What kind of justice?! Justice and Zidane don’t fit together!”

“When we’ll return to Alexandria, I want Zidane to be judged under a fair court. He still had saved me, and I have considered him a great friend for all the time I knew him. I know he isn’t completely malevolent. Maybe… Maybe we can change and reform him…”

A part of Zidane’s heart formed a painful knot, but he couldn’t let them know his weakness for the Princess. If only things were as easy as Dagger wished. No, instead, he’ll have to escape them. He

had to remain strong. After all, on this remote continent, hidden spots where he might find shelter were scarce and numerous. This will grant him the opportunity to hide.

When the giant elevator reached to the bottom, each Gaians present were awe by the beautiful lights surrounding the place with what looked like a giant harp with bright strings under their feet. The depth of the light appeared to be so deep they were unable to see the end of this harp through this fog of light, the bottom completely invisible to them. When they stopped to admire the décor, Zidane sighed at them before ordering them to hurry up, his first words to them for a while.

Before they could explore this new platform over that gigantic harp, the ground began to shake, prompting everyone to give away a shriek of shock. Everyone decided to join where Zidane stood, right at the end of the lower platform.

Before them, a wide, grand creature with the appearance of a dead, humanoid tree floated above them.

“We meet again, Soulcage,” a calm Zidane said before the monster as the others unsheathed their weapons.

“**Zidane,**” the creature spoke through everyone’s mind. The Gaians freaked out as they grabbed their head in confusion. So, Zidane had been telling them another truth. He knew the secret behind this Iifa Tree and what Soulcage really was. “**You were a small child when I last met you. You have grown up since then.**”

“Yeah, yeah, right,” Zidane responded, rolling his eyes out of boredom at this creature Garland had created long, long time ago. “You’re making the Mist and all this and that. We know it’s a by-product of the soul dividing process, or something. Can’t remember well. My attention span is crap. Oh yeah, and Kuja uses the Mist to create Black Mages like this little guy.” He pointed at Vivi who gulped and replaced his hat in discomfort.

Soulcage revealed, “**I see you have vile intentions against me. Where is Kuja?**”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Zidane continued. The smile on his lips had become corrupt with spiteful intents.

“**I can hear the lie in your voice, little one. Unlike you, I cannot lie. What a pity.**”

“We’re here to stop the Mist, that’s all, so you’re going down!” the tailed boy carried on as he took his two daggers out and adopted his attacking stance.

“**Then let it be.**” Soulcage began to collect the spiritual energy needed to battle against its foes. “**I will see the end of your ways, Zidane, and to your friends as well.**”

“We’re not his friends!” Blank snarled at the living tree, but before he could do anything, a shockwave propelled by the creature launched everyone to the ground.

As the group got on their feet, Zidane shouted at the girls, “Soulcage is undead too! Just use your healing spells!”

They could have sworn they heard an echoing snort in their mind.

Having fought so many battles against undead creatures in this giant tree, both Dagger and Eiko stood ready, preparing their strongest White magic spells to get rid of the Mist once and for all. They both started a Life spell which surrounded the monster into a bright, blinding light that instantly shattered the millennium creature into nothingness. Soulcage was gone.

With its disappearance, the surrounding Mist began to disperse and vanish in the thin air.

What an anticlimactic battle…

“Man, this supposedly super powerful monster was easy as pea!” Blank snickered with a stretch of the body. “If only we knew this centuries ago, we’d get rid of him so long ago and we’d avoid so many useless wars!”

“We did it! We cleared the world of the Mist!” Vivi claimed, looking happier than ever despite his dark face not showing any clear facial expression. “There will be no more tools of war created!”

Coming from this small Black Mage, this situation sounded even more ironic and somehow sad.

Everyone cheered on their accomplishment and victory, and yet, Zidane was the only one sulking in defeat, having his own personal thoughts to deal with. This was not his place to celebrate his traitorous act against Kuja’s plans. Retreating to a corner alone, he stared at the overjoyed Gaians celebrating. He sighed and sat down, waiting for them to settle down.

A portion of him was satisfied that a part of Kuja's plans came down in failure. This was all his brother deserved for having lied to him through his life.

But how come he could not find himself to hate him more? What if Kuja did it all because he was afraid to be alone? Not all these years of fraternity could have been lies. They certainly were true to him.

That painful confusion shattered his mind, and he no longer knew what to think of it.

Dagger was the first to come to him. To his conflicted surprise, she offered him a shy, yet kind smile. Lending a hand to help him get on his feet, she said, "We couldn't have done this without you, Zidane. Thank you."

No, he must not fall in love again. He knew Dagger will never forgive him for his crimes.

"Let's go back to the surface," Zidane suggested, not even accepting Dagger's hand as he got up on his own. Exhibiting his discontentment, he was not sharing their happiness. He went back to the giant elevator with the rest of the group following him, their trip back to the surface done in silence.

As soon as they reached the surface from their last lift, when Zidane was about to escape with his first step out of the platform, he saw a wave of sparkles raining over him. These light particles suddenly gained weight on him as drowsiness hit hard. While his vision blurred and his head fell into a deep ache, he struggled to turn around to find out that both Dagger and Eiko had casted a powerful Sleep magic on him.

He realized this was Dagger’s plan since the start to prevent his escape to freedom.

In his last straw after dropping heavily on the ground, Zidane shot a last glare as he let a low and long growl of fury at them. Eyes filled with anger and sorrow at the same time, a pang of pain stabbed his heart from within, feeling betrayed once again. Soon, he could no longer defy his torpor. Shutting his lids, he let himself drift into a deep slumber.

…

“There, now, we can bring him back to Alexandria to get him judged without him harming us,” the princess commented. “We’ll have to find a place where we can lock him in the meanwhile, after we save Mother from her madness.”

“Do I have to carry him all the way back?” Blank objected, looking exhausted.

“Oh, I have a small wagon in my town that we can use to lift him!” Eiko exclaimed and bounced before summoning her tiny Moogle friend from her pocket. “Hey, Mog! Can you ask our Moogle friends in town to prepare the wagon for us when we’ll get home?”

“Kupo kupo!” the small Moogle cried out with excitement before she flied off toward the ruins of the town.

Scratching the back of his head, Blank grinned. “Well, guess I’ll have to carry him in the meanwhile!” he said.

“Allow me to help,” Dagger added as she began to tie the unconscious tailed young man. “This was my decision to let him live. I won’t leave you alone in this burden of transportation.”

As Blank helped Dagger to roll the rope around the sleeping Zidane, Vivi was suddenly alarmed by an echoing roar high in the sky. He stared up to spot a white dragon from high above, completely out of their reach. “I hope the dragon won’t see us…” the

Black Mage told himself as he fidgeted with his fingers in fear.

Eiko gazed up too and noticed the same dragon that seemed to be soaring in circle. “A Silver Dragon,” she said. “They roam around the Iifa Tree all the time, but they won’t leave this area. They won’t do anything to us as long as they don’t spot us.”

“B-But…” Vivi stuttered and pointed at the sky. “This one seems to b-be gla… g-glaring at us!”

Before the two older ones even noticed the dragon, Eiko and Vivi screamed with a hug to each other as the huge Silver Dragon dived straight to their direction. Alerted, Blank and Dagger left the sleeping tailed boy and rushed to the children to look above and spot the same majestic creature hurling at them at a tremendous speed. They were about to escape from where they stood to avoid being crushed by the feral giant creature.

But their plan went for naught.

The dragon landed gracefully to where the unconscious Zidane was being tied, abandoned by the Gaians.

“It’s going to eat him!” Blank hollered, near ready to save Zidane and rush to help.

The Silver Dragon turned its feral glare at Blank. With a booming roar, it launched the party out of the way with its own magic which they recognized as “Shockwave”. The magic attack pushed everyone to the ground, incapacitating them for a second to which only the young man sustained minimal damage upon the landing.

Satisfied that the Gaians were far away from it, it returned his stare at Zidane. From where the Princess dusted herself of the dirt of the ground, she grasped how the feral dragon’s eyes were slowly shifting with a gentle compassion when it gazed back at the tailed boy.

She did not believe it. It was the infamous dragon that had supposedly devoured her father. It was Zidane’s own pet.

Fearing to lose its master, the big dragon lowered its head to the sleeping young man before it cuddled the body with its muzzle and cheeks with a long, gentle purr. It licked its master’s face before it carefully caught his body between its fangs and slowly dropped him on its furred back. It shot a

furious glare at the Gaians one last time before it took off in the sky.

Thus, the King's murderer escaped, once again.

Despite the small wounds he sustained from the earlier fall, Blank glared at Dagger with a shrug as if he wasn't hurt. He exclaimed, "Hey, at least, we won't have to carry his dead weight anymore!"

Author's note*: I had originally planned that Zidane sleeps the whole way through the battle against Soulcage and all, but that would have been too silly. As this story is more focused on the brothers' point of view, having an entire part with none of them present or conscious would be a problem. I had to add more soap opera-ish love thing without having too much romance because I'm not fan of romantic stories.*

Also, you can totally tell that I've been lazy at the Soulcage fight part by using the easiest way to defeat it. Also, the chapter was already long, so I'm sparing everyone of boring fight descriptions.

Chapter 19: Demise

Some swearing ahead, but I don't think swearing is a reason to raise the rating of a story.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 19: Demise

Kuja did not want to admit that when he discovered Zidane unconscious on Mahila's back, things like this might become a recurrent routine from now on. His little brother's reckless actions will always bring them problems in a way or another. Perhaps it was these instincts Garland had set into his younger brother and more "perfect" Angel of Death that turned him into a ruthless, unstoppable killing machine. How ironic, for the supposedly unstoppable machine to be stopped by inferior Gaians.

At least, that was his theory of what had happened.

Perhaps the same story from his previous incidents happened again today. Thoughts crossing, he asked himself how Garland could still see Zidane

as the perfect one of the two. After all, Kuja knew their master was monitoring them on constant basis and that old android was aware about all the dumb actions and mistakes Zidane kept on causing. Why didn't Garland use their connected minds to tell Zidane to stop being a brat or something? Perhaps the old man refused to admit that he had been wrong about his most cherished creation.

Or this was exactly what Garland had intended on him.

The second thought was something Kuja had been pondering through his life. If Zidane truly had made mistakes that brought grave consequences that might even bring Garland's goals to naught, Kuja was sure their master would have manifested before them by now. However, he did not, and this prospect scared him.

Mistakes or not, this time, Kuja noticed something unusual on Zidane's body.

It was the lack of visible wounds and stains.

Upon a closer inspection, he discovered a strong Sleep spell flowing through his brother, the same kind of magic he had casted on the Princess for the extraction ceremony. Either he will have to wait for

the spell to dispel itself after few days, or he could dispel it himself with a simple snap of the fingers, which he did.

As a swirl of sparkles surrounded the blond young man, Zidane stirred away from his cursed slumber. With few murmurs and moans, he lazily set his eyes closed before he sensed a hand caressing his cheeks. Curious to what was happening, he began to open his eyes in a world of blur. He allowed more time for his vision to sharpen and he realized with a shocking surprise that he was being stroked by none other than his older brother.

Startled, Zidane leaped with a yelp and fell from Mahila's back, prompting Kuja to laugh at him and their Silver Dragon to soar away, back to the desert sky.

Having landed on the ground awkwardly triggered complete awakening on Zidane who dusted himself from the fall. Ostensibly annoyed by the sudden gain of consciousness, the boy tried processing what had happened and he finally gathered all the events from before.

His trip to the Iifa Tree, Garnet, or rather Dagger's group, their encounter with Soulcage and

then, Dagger’s betrayal, again. Wait a minute, what was he doing here in the Desert Palace entrance?

At least he was safe here…

All these lies from Kuja that had betrayed his trust against Dagger’s demands suddenly vanished like he couldn’t completely acquire the hatred he needed to look at his brother with a fury glare. He could not get to hate him despite how much he tried. That brotherly love they had shared through their lives was still anchored in him so deep and from his outset.

“Oh, hey, Kuja,” Zidane rubbed his face, getting rid of all the trace of sleepiness from him.

Nevertheless, Kuja remained stoic, keeping up with his serious attitude. “Spare me of your greetings,” the elder sibling said, waiting for Zidane to get hold of himself and sit back. “Just tell me what happened.”

There it came. Zidane was aware of what Kuja wished for answers. All about what happened in the Iifa Tree and about the lack of Mist now. However, he knew he’ll have to play the dumb and oblivious guy. Thankfully, he was quite a good actor. Shaking his head from Kuja’s demand, Zidane blinked at him

in silence for a moment. “Huh? What do you mean?”

Folding his arms with his smile now gone, Kuja responded, “You have to explain why the Mist has suddenly disappeared from Gaia.”

“W-What?!” Zidane exclaimed, playing the clueless, innocent guy. “Wait, how is it possible? What happened to the Mist?”

Well, Zidane certainly looked and sounded convincing enough if Kuja’s usual smile did not come back. He must be believing his brother’s ignorance. “You don’t know anything?” Kuja asked, somehow distressed after getting no clear answer.

“Do I look like I know anything?” Zidane protested, his voice strained by panic. “Wait, I just remember Garnet casting sleep on me when I was on a stroll around the Iifa Tree!”

Kuja froze. “Wait a second. Princess Garnet was there?”

“Yeah,” Zidane responded, his low voice exhibiting an apologetic tone. He turned to Kuja with a serious frown on his face. “You predicted there was a chance Garnet and her friends would come to the Iifa Tree, so I decided to take a stroll

there with Mahila. I saw them gathering there, so I was going to call you for help, but before I could do anything, Garnet spotted me and casted Sleep on me… I don't know what happened after… Do you think they reached the bottom of the tree?"

The entire time Zidane began to speak, Kuja had his eyes set on his brother's body language to spot a tell that might surrender him with another grave lie, focusing on his wide turquoise eyes and his tail. After all, Zidane had lied to him about the incident in the Ice Cavern. But with Zidane having nothing to lose now that Garnet knew the truth of her father's murder, the boy didn't seem like he was lying. To add, his tale did fit with the fact that he bore no injuries from their meeting this time.

Then, something hit Kuja in his thoughts. "If the Mist had vanished, then the group had reached the bottom of the tree and fought Soulcage," Kuja commented, fingers on his chin. "Then, are you insinuating that they have used your body to power on the lifts and elevators inside the tree?" The mental image of a sleeping Zidane being pulled by the party seemed to momently bring a weak smile to Kuja.

Zidane frowned at him, looking worried. “Wait, what?!” the younger man exclaimed, now horrified. “Do you really think they used my body for this?!”

“This is the only explanation I have,” Kuja said with a shake to the head. “As the lifts will only work with the presence of Terran creatures, only you and I can lead the Gaians to the deep basement. I suppose they have defeated Soulcage in the meanwhile.”

“Man, this is so weird,” Zidane exclaimed, hitting the ground with his fists in anger. “How could they have done this? What about your plans now?”

“It’s not your fault,” Kuja commented, this time with a kind chuckle. “The Princess has casted Sleep on you. We need to find a way to protect ourselves from these inconvenient spells. After all, there is not much we can do against a Sleep spell. However, we will need to check the Iifa Tree and see how we can get the Mist back. Anyhow, Soulcage was only the façade of the Mist creation process. Killing him will not stop the Mist completely.”

Somehow remorseful for having lied to him about everything, Zidane was moved by how Kuja held no anger toward him for having failed to his duty. Kuja might have lied to him few times too, but they were still siblings and a family.

After all, Kuja was all he had now.

When they arrived to the Iifa Tree hours later with their Silver Dragon companion, they were able to spot the Princess and her group. Among them, an unknown man of high stature with long red hair walked. Unlike the others, that man appeared awfully composed like nothing could upset him. With the Gaians present, Zidane was pumped for action, but Kuja thought it was wiser to approach the group with more careful, baby steps.

With their presence, access to the bottom of the tree will make everything more problematic. However, Kuja was thankful there were residual Mist parts being ejected from the roots which Kuja could use to his advantage.

Thanks to their altitude in the sky, where a greater view awaited, Kuja was able to discern from afar all these great boats on the ocean making their advance to the Outer Continent’s direction. He could not help but grin at it. He recognized Queen Brahne’s armada.

The Alexandrian ruler must be coming after the brothers, too. Unlike the Princess’s group who

wished to get rid of the source of Kuja's living weapons, the Queen must have another goal set in her mind. Perhaps she now knew the truth about the brothers' implication in the murder of the King, or she had simply become too mad to think rational and she wanted to conquer more lands. At this point, Kuja could not tell nor that he even cared.

Soon enough, the Princess's party below spotted the Silver Dragon and the brothers in the sky. Their meeting was now inevitable. "We should have some fun with them," Kuja said, his lips forming a smile upon glaring at the people below.

This had gotten Zidane more excited than ever. Finally, he will get to fight the Gaians together with Kuja for having messed with them.

But then, an alarming thought ran across.

What if the group will reveal the truth about Zidane's earlier implication to Kuja? What will his older brother think of him? Will Kuja ever forgive him for having tried to ruin his plans?

Zidane will have no choice but to rely on lady luck this time…

They landed around the higher parts of the tree, waiting for the group to join them by climbing and

forcing them to exhaustion. This was not an easy task, especially with the Princess and the two children who were not the most adventurous climbing adepts. They speeded up the climbing process with the red-haired man keeping the children under his arms and Blank keeping Garnet who held on to his back. Minutes later, the Tailed Brothers were joined by the Gaian group where both men panted and sweat heavy from the awful climbing.

“Well, well. If this isn’t the canary and her flock,” Kuja chuckled at the group and mocked their miserable postures. “Have you come here straight to the lair of your predator to watch your precious lives devoured?”

“Not our lives, but yours!” Blank shouted at the brothers after combining more air to his tired lungs, which incited more giggles from the silver-haired man.

However, Zidane could not avert his sight away from that mysterious red-haired man among them. He had been trying to put his finger why the man reminded him of something vague. He was unable to tell why he was giving him the strange effect, but this was definitely not a positive feeling. To his

shock, that man appeared to give them the same long and calm glare filled with a fire of hatred within. When Zidane turned to his brother, he realized that Kuja was staring at the same man as well.

Few seconds later, Kuja began to laugh harder. “Ah, so the cruel murderer shows his face again!” he exclaimed, and the stranger’s frown hardened as if he knew what Kuja was talking about. “How do you feel as the killer of the lovely Lady Queen, our dear departed ‘mother’ Josephine Tribal?”

The fur on Zidane’s tail rose up. Now, he recalled everything, years ago, around the time when he had disposed of their filthy rich mother figure. To get themselves clean, they had casted the blame on a random worker in the Tribal House who happened to be an Auction House guard. He did not remember the name of the falsely accused man, but he did remember his tall stature and the long red hair. So, that wanted man was still alive.

Shocked by the revelation, the Gaian companions all turned to the red-haired man, though said man remained calm, like he was no longer troubled by this crime of the past. With a simple humph, the man folded his arms, looking away from everyone. “It

was the mistake of a youth," he said when a strange smile crept to his lips.

"W-What? You really killed someone?" Eiko asked, her eyes pleading for the man's innocence. From the way she looked at him, she seemed to have a certain childish affinity with him.

"I never said I killed anyone," he continued with the same stoic tone. "My mistake was finding a decent job as a guard for the Treno's Auction House with the Tribal family as my superiors."

This truly was the man Zidane had thought of, the one who was found out as their "guardian's" murderer. 'Everyone working under our main superior, Lady Queen, knew the truth,' he carried on with his story. "Of course, when I was found guilty of her murder, no one had lifted a finger to call out for my innocence. They were afraid of the Tailed Brothers who were known to all as a subpar mage and as a great fighter duo. Rumors running across Treno and eyewitnesses had spoken of their capabilities of getting rid of very strong monsters in an instant, which had put the whole city in fear. It was too obvious the brothers were after Lady Queen's immense fortune. However, I've outgrown these false accusations, and I became a bounty

hunter. I still have a code of honor to follow and I can say that these brothers have no honor themselves."

Both children stared at the man in confusion, but Blank and Dagger had their eyes drawn to the brothers, horrified and furious to see their true wicked nature and just how much they were going against the world just to get what they wanted. How were they even able to murder anything and anyone without an ounce of mercy and guilt? "Just how many people have you killed?!" Dagger screamed at the brothers as she tried to tame her tears. "You're nothing but devils! How could I even love you once, Zidane Tribal?!"

"Man, even a devil can't be THAT bad!" Blank added more coolly, but he was obviously as furious as the young woman.

Zidane stiffened. Cold goosebumps rushed across his skin again as he processed what his former crush had just told like she'd been trying to stab his already broken heart. From where he stood, Kuja noticed his brother's uneasiness and he realized that Zidane still owned some feelings for the woman who detested him now. But he knew Zidane was trying to remain strong, like Garnet's words did not

affect him with an emotional pain. Zidane must not show his weakness to his foes right now.

Instead, a smile formed over their lips. Zidane's one was forced, Kuja could tell. He knew his little brother like the bottom of his pockets. After all, he had raised him for sixteen long years. "Oh, young brother. Look around you," Kuja said with a poetic tone, staring ahead to the sea where the naval armada came forward at a slow pace. It seemed the Gaian group had not noticed the Alexandrian floating squadron yet. "We are surrounded by savage rodents, gnawing on our plans and crawling to our humble lair to carry their diseases. How should we get rid of these vile vermins?"

As the wind flowed stronger against his face, Kuja contemplated the horizon where the fleet found its way to the Iifa Tree, the group still unaware of the Queen's presence on the ocean. "Oh dear," Kuja continued, toning his voice down into a coo, hovering a finger over his lips before he tossed his front hair to the side. "Zidane, admire the clear water of the surrounding ocean, separating us from the lively Mist Continent. Feast your eyes over this wonder of the Gaian nature. Don't you see all these ugly, artificial moving dots ruining the image of the beautiful ocean like desperate, crawling ants?"

When Kuja mentioned the ocean, the Princess's party turned around. Despite the great distance from where they stood, the Princess gasped in horror as she immediately recognized what should be her mother's naval fleet. This time, the tears she'd been trying to hide came out. "Mother!" she cried and collapsed to her knees.

When everyone gathered around her, Blank caught her shoulders, trying to get her back on her feet. "What is Mother doing here? What is she trying to achieve?!" she wailed and cried into the Tantalus man's shoulders.

"Perhaps the ugly elephant lady is done conquering the Mist Continent and now, she covets more lands!" Kuja teased the Princess's distress and anger with a laugh. "Her insatiable hunger for conquest is just as wide as her corpulence! Even her beloved daughter cannot stop her cherished mother!"

"You were the one who have corrupted her heart!" Dagger screamed at Kuja. "She used to be a sweetheart until you and Zidane came to our lives! You ruined everything! Our lives and this world!"

"Oh no, my little canary," the silver-haired man rebutted. "All Gaians have a darkness waiting to be fed with evil. All I did was to sustain your mother's

heart with more darkness, all for her benefits and joy, of course!”

Blank shouted at him. “That’s the very definition of corruption with more complicate words! You guys should get a dictionary, geez!”

“No matter,” the tailed young main continued. “When the Queen’s fleet will reach to us, she shall face death with open arms as I will send my faithful minions at her!”

Everyone froze at the latest comment, even Zidane who turned to him, his brows narrowing with misunderstanding. “What are you talking about?” the younger brother whispered to Kuja, shocked to hear about these “minions”. Since when did they have minions under them to do their biddings?

While Kuja did not give his brother the answer he sought for, Dagger felt drawn to a particular direction where she heard something from within. Grabbing her pendant between her hands like she was praying, she stared at the direction where she heard the voice. Unsure where this was going to lead her, she began to walk to that direction. “Something is calling me…” she whispered before she ran ahead, leaving her companions. “A sealed Eidolon is

around here… It says it can help us stop Mother's fleet!"

And without warning, she ran off faster.

"Dagger!" Blank cried after her before a gruesome giant, insect-like arthropod creature arose from the residual Mist. It crawled out of the tree's surface with a roar and stopped the group from rejoining the Princess in her marathon.

The Gaians were now too busy to deal with the Tailed Brothers, much to Zidane's relief. At least, they had made no mention of Zidane's implication during their trip to the bottom of the Iifa Tree, sparing him from Kuja's possible scolding and even worse. He was safe now.

As the group struggled to get through this fight against their disgusting foe, Kuja gazed upon the scene, sneering over the Gaians' battle. Still puzzled, Zidane gave Kuja a glare and a pout of disappointment from having been kept into oblivion from these strange monsters that had just appeared. "Since when can you create monsters from the Mist without machines and stuff?" he asked, waiting for an answer.

“Oh, magician’s secrets,” Kuja joked on him with a teasing beam. “If you really want to know, this is a magical knowledge I’ve acquired some time ago, but now I’ve just gotten the ideal occasion to test it with Garnet’s companions. I’ve lectured you about it before, but evidently, you have not been paying attention to me at all, or the memory has failed you. I call these creatures Mistodons.”

Frustrated over Kuja’s mockery, Zidane put his fist on his hips with a sulk stuck on his face. “I don’t remember you telling me anything about any Mistodons or anything like that!” the blond boy objected. “If they’re so convenient, why aren’t just creating an army of them?”

“Creating them requires a part of my magic stamina,” the elder sibling revealed. “It drains my magic powers, and even with an Ether, it also exhausts a part of my physical self. Creating more than ten from the Mist will get me too tired to do anything. Few of them will suffice to slow down our foes for now.”

Much to Kuja’s expectations, the Gaian group was able to destroy the Mistodon’s short life. Abandoning the brothers for a more important

purpose, they ran after Dagger's direction to join and help her instead.

As they watched them running and disappearing behind the roots and rocks, Zidane asked, "Do you think the sealed Eidolon Garnet spoke of can save the Queen?"

Giggling at his brother's question, Kuja stayed mute for another instant.

"I doubt it."

"Kuja Tribal! It's time you show off your girly face!" Queen Brahne hollered and laughed with her surrounding Black Mages. "You and your monkey little brother will get a taste of my acquired power! Thanks to your generous knowledge with these Eidolons and your Black Mages, I can finally avenge my dearly husband! How proud Alexander would be to see me in this glorious day!"

As her fleet made its advance toward the Iifa Tree, the Queen fiddled in a pocket to take out a shining Eidolon gem. Hugging it like a precious personal object, she put it to her cheeks. "Oh yes, this is it," she bragged, not minding the complete

passive Black Mages standing with her. “With this, Kuja and his little brother will be reduced to dust, and I will rule over the world!”

She raised the gem high to the air, yelling, “Bahamut! Come forth!”

From the back of their Silver Dragon, the Genome brothers watched as a pillar of light rose from the biggest ship of the fleet. The beam pierced through the sky before it vanished to bring complete darkness to the surrounding. The shaking earth created some torrents of tsunami, even sinking few ships of the Alexandrian armada. The screams and cries of despair from the innocent soldiers who sank under the waves were like an orchestra of destruction to the mad Queen who had no care of these few sacrifices.

When a grounding roar resounded and a great dark dragon emerged from the vastness of the ocean, the smile on Kuja broadened. Yet, Zidane could not find himself in the mood to smile at the legendary creature that had nearly killed him twice.

However, this time, Zidane was not going to let the fear get the best of him. He won’t allow a third attempt from the legendary dragon.

“We meet again, Bahamut,” Kuja greeted the great dragon.

As if the gigantic dragon was actually listening to its foe, it growled and roared with a rising intensity, now confident it will able to defeat its master’s enemies. Without effort and warning, the dark dragon shot wide, powerful beams from its mouth at the flying Silver Dragon where the brothers were holding onto her. Startled by the huge monster, Mahila shrieked and soared to the opposite direction, trying to duck all the beams.

Pleased to see the struggle of their Silver Dragon pet to avoid all the attacks, Queen Brahne laughed harder and louder. What should be like fear from the brothers and their dragon companion granted her complete peace of mind after the suffering King Alexander must have gone through when they had coldly murdered the gentle leader. Despite everything she had gained from Kuja, mainly all that power and that soulless army, none of that could replace her husband’s death. Kuja and the Monkey Boy were getting what they deserved.

When one of the attacks actually hit the Silver Dragon, even from the distance, Brahne heard the

dragon’s cry and she widened her grin, their suffering like music to her ears.

Thankfully, Kuja had casted a magic shield, providing them total protection from the beam that should have incapacitated their dragon if it had hit. However, with all the Mistodons he had created and manipulated earlier, he was no longer certain if he still possessed enough magic power to cast another one of these protective shields. If their Silver Dragon found herself into one of these blasts again, he did not think they will survive the blow.

Bahamut had gotten closer to the brothers, intended to kill its master’s foes without failing. Yet, this was exactly what Kuja wanted, for the monster to approach until it reached to a specific area. Only then, he will get his time to focus on a certain airship nearby… Only few more hundred meters…

“Watch out!”

As another beam came straight forward them, Zidane pushed Kuja on Mahila’s back, forcing him to crouch down while the younger brother adopted a standing position before him. The blast came through, hitting a part of Mahila’s back and Zidane’s body to one side as both took the blow intended on Kuja. Both dragon and young Genome screamed as

the blow tore part of their skin and fur apart, leaving a fuming scorch on them. Thankfully, the blow on the dragon wasn't serious enough as Mahila stabilized herself fast for the brothers to not let them fall to their death below. The blast left a bruised and weakened Zidane who collapsed on their dragon's back as his body quivered like a frail leaf.

"Z-Zidane!" Kuja threw himself on his brother, checking on his injuries. Luckily, most of the blow had been avoided thanks to Mahila's dodging skills. A single Cure spell was enough to put Zidane back on his rear, but not enough for him to stand and keep balance on their dragon.

Taking advantage of their distracted instant, Bahamut stopped from its track and built up more magic energy for another powerful blast. But this time, Kuja was not bothered by the immense power.

Bahamut soared exactly where Kuja wanted it to be.

From here, Kuja raised his arms in the sky before he cried, "Come, Invincible! Show us what you can do!"

…

Master Garland. I have been researching on the Gaian Eidolons. The Summoners are using an innate, special frequency to control them. If only we could tweak the Invincible to project the same frequency, just imagine the possibilities!

I see. Let me check what can be done.

O Master Garland. I am certain your engineering, mechanic and programming prowess will bring wonders to the Invincible!

Flattery will get you nowhere, Kuja.

Oh, please! Spare me of your morals! I am doing this for YOUR purpose, after all.

Do not abuse of this power, however. Only when the necessity comes.

Yes, sure.

…

Above the giant dragon, a wide red eyeball appeared out of nowhere behind the curtain of dark clouds, shooting a hypnotizing glare at the Eidolon. Before Bahamut even noticed it, a blast of glowing rings with strange frequencies triggered an immense confusion inside the legendary creature like it was struggling from within. As if a parasite crawled into

its mind, the great dragon could no longer take control of its surrounding as it became lost in a fog where a new master emerged from its thoughts.

The majestic creature roared again in frustration, trying to fight the control of this frequency. Along its internal battle to keep its mind, it began to shoot beams at random directions, one hitting straight to one of the Alexandrian ships and killing all its passengers in an instant.

From the sky above, as Zidane was weakly recovering from the last blast, Kuja admired his new legendary slave when it could no longer struggle against the Invincible's frequency. Having the absolute control of this Terran airship signified that Bahamut was under his absolute control now.

Satisfied after the giant dragon had settled down, Kuja whispered.

"Bahamut. You will dispose of the Alexandrian armada and its Queen."

Days after Alexandria's defeat and the death of its Queen, the Genome brothers learned of the official, very heavy bounty for their heads for the

genocide catalyst and the murder of King Alexander and Queen Brahne. This was it; they'd lost their home and business in Treno as well as their title as noblemen. They must no longer show their faces to the public view as they will get pursued with forks and rocks and get a death sentence before the court will even declare them guilty. And with no way to bring the Mist for now, Black Mage production was no longer possible either. What a pity, to lose years of efforts in mere minutes.

However, with all his efforts to get hold on the current most powerful legend of Gaia, with Bahamut under his control with the Invincible, Kuja was satisfied enough. If the rest of his plans will progress as envisioned, Garland's defeat was only across the corner, and the brothers will be fully freed of his grip.

But even having their freedom in mind, when Kuja's joy grew from his constant victories over the limits Garland had implemented on him, Zidane appeared gloomier as the days went by. Since they got their hands on the great dragon Eidolon, the young boy would shut himself away from his older brother, either in his room or the library. Sometimes, he'd go outside in the hot desert fighting random monsters at large as if he'd been trying to stray his

mind from something. Even the boy became reluctant to share any of his spoken thoughts when Kuja asked him questions without getting answers to his sudden, miserable mood.

Kuja suspected that owning and controlling Bahamut had something to do with this, despite Zidane being content that his brother's goal for world domination was approaching fast. Yet, he knew of Zidane's fears of Eidolons and especially the one he possessed now. With each battle against the legendary dragon, Zidane had gotten out of the fight in complete defeat, either barely alive or unconscious. If it were not for Kuja's fast actions, Zidane should have been dead meat each time.

Whenever Kuja came to check his younger brother to explain that he needed to have answers, Zidane would not tell him anything. Instead, he escaped the subject in a way or another, either by leaving without a word or telling him to "fuck off". Was this simply a part of him growing up to adulthood? Still, it pained Kuja to see Zidane appearing plummeted by something in his mind and he wanted to know what was wrong. There was something and Zidane was hiding his pain.

Once, however, there was a slip of the tongue when Zidane had whispered something about to stop using Bahamut. This was odd, considering Kuja had only used the Eidolon once and that was to destroy the Queen's fleet, which had been more like a defensive offense than anything.

One night, Kuja decided it might be wiser to check on him during his sleep where he examined a slumbering Zidane shaking on his bed in sweat. Even his limbs and tail twitched at time like a strange fever had been rendering him sick and on the verge of insanity. Genomes were supposed to be sturdier than a normal Gaian, but they were not immune to the diseases of Gaia. When Kuja came closer to verify his body temperature and listen to his younger sibling murmuring nonsenses in his sleep, he was alerted by one specific word escaping the blond boy's mouth.

Or rather, one name.

"G… Garland…"

Wait, was Zidane actually dreaming about Garland? Kuja knew dreams were hard to control, so either he was having a nightmare, or perhaps… What if… Garland was actually haunting Zidane's mind?

But then, another name came to his lips.

“N… No… Ku… ja…”

The face on Zidane when he mentioned his name appeared so sad, yet filled with fear and frustration. The boy was having an awful nightmare.

When Zidane woke up the next morning, Kuja asked him if everything was alright. As expected, the younger man only said yes before he went out for another stroll fighting things without another word for the rest of the day. Yet, the next night, Kuja went to spy on him once more.

The same occurred. Even Garland’s name came back.

Kuja had no choice. It was now or never.

“Zidane, tell me what’s happening,” he asked when they crossed path in the palace halls.

“Nothing,” Zidane said.

Determined to know the true answer, Kuja caught him by the arm as Zidane was getting away to avoid any discussion he didn’t want to reveal about. “This is a lie,” he said to the younger sibling, and Zidane froze. The elder brother sighed. He will draw the

truth out of him. “You’ve been sleeping like you were having nightmares.”

“You… were checking on me during my sleep?” Zidane inquired, taken aback. A frown formed over him. “You’re no better than that old man, then.”

“What?” Kuja knew who Zidane was speaking about. To be compared with the man he hated so much had brought the fury out. Trying to contain the anger, he caught Zidane by the shoulders and shook him hard. Strangely, Zidane did not seem affected by Kuja’s anger. “How can you bring me to the same level as him?”

Reluctant, Zidane turned away but Kuja still held to his arm. Blended by an irritation and an unexpected sorrow, Zidane swallowed but remained mute. Kuja begged him, “Just tell me.”

Looking away like he’d been having regrets, Zidane’s stance became more relaxed. Deep in thoughts, the boy slowly retired his arm away from Kuja’s grip that had softened to his answer.

“Garland…”

So, Kuja was right. This was about him. The rage inside built atop a greater wrath, but he prevented it

from manifesting. He had to stay calm with his brother.

“He’s speaking to me… only me… in our connected minds.”

Now, this revelation came to Kuja as a shock. While Garland sometimes spoke to them, he was making sure both brothers were all ears to him and the moments were rare, at least for Kuja. It was only now he realized that Garland had the capability to speak with only one of his angels at a time.

Somehow, the idea disgusted him.

“He’s telling me… the same thing over and over… That Gaia’s crystal assimilation by Terra’s crystal is near… That I, not us, must do the needful, that… I m-must kill you…”

Kuja tensed.

“He tells me that… I was created with the purpose to replace the ‘failed prototype’, this means you… that I am his perfect Angel of Death. He says that… now that the war catalyst has been set on Gaia and that I am of age… that he doesn’t need you anymore, that I don’t need you… He k-keeps repeating the same things to m-me… to kill you for being a failure, for your disobedience, for your

insolence… He even haunts me d-during my s-sleeps…”

His distress visible, Zidane shook his head, his hands on his head, fingers spread across his hair with despair and tears swelling his wet orbits. “I can’t take it anymore, Kuja! I don’t want to be monitored on endless basis! I-I don’t want to be Garland’s Angel of D-Death! I don’t want to hear him harassing me to kill y-you! You… You’re not a failure! You’re just yourself, you’re my big brother, dammit! Fuck this planet’s assimilation! Fuck this war! Fuck Terra!”

Wailing through his incessant bawls, Zidane sank his face into Kuja’s chest, muffling his cries and coveting the warmth of his brother like a crying child seeking for his parent’s love. Despite Zidane’s effort to hang onto Kuja, the elder sibling could not find himself to hug back his brother, still shocked by the revelation. The sound vibration provided by his younger brother’s crying seemed to bring a bigger pain and also fear to his heart which triggered a cold shiver across his body.

As the tension turned to relief and calm, Kuja finally wrapped his brother in his arms, stroking his

back and hair. He hushed to him, “Since when… did Garland start telling you these words?”

Luckily for him, Zidane appeared compliant enough to give a clear answer. He moved his head backward, allowing his words to get out.

The answer surprised him.

“He began… the day I’ve disposed of the King.”

All this time, Kuja had never been aware of this.

“Garland didn’t contact me often back then… But the first time he did, I… cried… It was during the King’s funeral… I remember, I told you that I was crying because of Garnet’s Eidolons, but… this was all bullshit! I didn’t want to tell you about Garland because I… didn’t want to worry you… And then, he’d remind me of this at least once a month… then once a week when I reached thirteen… And when you captured Bahamut, it’s been ev… every d-days, every h-hours, even when I’m s-sleeping…”

Lost in his wail again, Zidane hugged onto Kuja tighter.

“I-I don’t want to kill you! You’re my family! You’re my b-brother!”

After alleviating himself, he added, “I’ve lost Garnet already…”

The pang of guilt spread the pain in Kuja’s soul.

“We have Mahila but… She’s a dragon… Eventually, she’ll be gone with a m-mate… And… without you, I’ll be alone, K-Kuja…”

This was when Kuja realized Zidane’s only true fear.

To be alone.

…

Abroad the Invincible, the old man seemed pleased.

“Soon.”

Author’s note*: The part where Kuja stares at Zidane to check his body language is a tribute to my favorite character’s “power” in my other favorite fandom, Apollo Justice’s “Perceive” from the Ace Attorney series.*

The brotherly part at the end is actually a “spur-of-the-moment” idea that came because I couldn’t

sleep. I always get more inspired during these times and I thought it'd fit the theme of this fic's title.

This chapter so far had been the most difficult to write. It was supposed to be a longer chapter but I cut it in two.

Chapter 20: Legends

Well, a new FFIX tv series has been announced. I'm not sure if I should be worried or happy, but I've seen some of the cartoons done by the studio for the older kids, being a French studio and all. I think the animation and their style are pretty nice, speaking as someone who studied 3D animation in college.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 20: Legends

"So, what do you think you're going to do without servants to do stuff for you? I got to admit, I really, really miss having people making dinner for us. We can't cook for the lives of us. It's depressing."

"I certainly hope you are not serious about being depressed for such meaningless things. Don't you miss the old times when we used to hunt creatures and cook their meat with a Fire spell?"

"Hey! Why not? There's a Gaian saying that says 'Eating is one of the best feelings in the world', and

you’re damn right it’s true! It’s hard going back to our old ways after we’ve eaten royal food!”

“Oh? And where do you suggest we can find our own servants to cook for us? We are no longer noblemen. We do not possess the wealth anymore and I doubt anyone would agree to work for us when the whole world wants our heads.”

“Hey! Not the whole world! Just the ones living on the Mist Continent! What about the Dwarves?”

The mention of the Dwarves brought a melancholic smile over Kuja’s lips. It had been some time they had met these friendly, sentient creatures which Zidane seemed to like since the first day they had stumbled upon them together. Except for their obsession for marriages and ceremonies, the boy couldn’t hate anything about them. If anything, he would put them above all the other sentient Gaians for being a more peaceful race. If he had to be the perfect Angel of Death destined to destroy everything on the planet, he’d probably spare them.

And truth be told, Kuja didn’t find them bad either.

The idea of having some Dwarves working in the Desert Palace might sound decent, but they would

make awful servants. Even to this day, Kuja could not understand half of their horrible dialect.

“No, not the Dwarves,” Kuja answered, brushing off the comment. “Now, stop bothering me. We’ll have to go with the other plans to find our path to ultimate freedom and prove Master Garland that we’re better than he’d ever been.”

Whenever Zidane heard the name of their master, Kuja noticed the boy’s furred appendage all tensed up, suggesting complete discomfort at the name. According to him, Garland had continued to mess him with private telepathic messages to kill Kuja and the sort, but ever since Zidane had told his brother about it, it felt like a heavy burden off his shoulders. These orders to fulfil his purposes had become more meaningless to him with the support he was getting from Kuja.

And then, at one point, Garland had ceased sending him any more messages. The younger man couldn’t find a better relief than this. Yet his hatred for the old man had not changed. If so, it had become stronger.

Now, to protect the brother he had loved since his birth, or rather, his creation, Zidane was now more excited to comply with Kuja’s world domination

plans. They will prove Garland wrong and they will kill him. Perhaps even by now, they had already gained the potential to dispose of this old, rusted android.

This was so convenient for Kuja.

“Why do you keep calling him ‘Master Garland’?” Zidane asked and he folded his arms with a rising eyebrow. “I thought you hated the man. Calling him ‘Master’ gives him the little respect he doesn’t deserve from us.”

Kuja let a giggle out. “I apologize. This is merely a bad habit. He is still our master, but that does not mean we respect him.”

“Oh!” the younger sibling exclaimed all suddenly like an amazing idea crossed his mind, startling Kuja. “I think we can ask the Black Mages to do things for us!”

For few seconds, Kuja did not know why he just experienced one of these déjà-vu moments and he could not put his finger on why this discussion was becoming so familiar. And suddenly, it hit deep in his memories as he recalled the time when Zidane thought of the idea of creating “things like Genomes but for killing”. But this time, Kuja was about to

give up Zidane's comment as a simple ridiculous idea.

After all, except for that little prototype, there were no Black Mage anymore.

"Oh, and pray tell, brother, where do you suggest you will find these imaginary Black Mages?" Kuja stirred a mocking comment, but Zidane was unaffected by it.

"There's a hidden living forest in the dead forest close to Conde Petie!" Zidane revealed so contently and proudly the tip of his tail wagged a little. "It's full of sentient Black Mages! They're forming a community and everything!"

Kuja couldn't tell if Zidane was joking or not because his lively comment wasn't sounding sincere. Yet, he seemed to be so overjoyed to tell him this Kuja sensed like he had to follow with this dumb idea. If Zidane was telling him the truth, then why had he never told him about them before? "You're not believing me, aren't you?" Zidane pouted at him with a frown and folded arms.

Zidane's childish behavior right now reminded Kuja of the excited, bratty child Zidane used to be, a

side of him that had been lost since Garland had started to mess with his mind.

Oh, how the old man will pay…

“I’ll choose to believe when I’ll see them with my own eyes,” Kuja told him, and Zidane drew his fists to his hips in protest.

“Okay, fine, I’ll show you!”

Thankfully, the flight to the dead forest had not taken an hour on Mahila’s back. During their trip, by supposing Zidane had told him the truth, Kuja pondered on the ways to convince the Black Mages to join their cause, which might take more than a simple push. After all, if they were all self-aware just as that little prototype they had lost, then they might not be the same ruthless, emotionless killing machines he had engineered and produced. Maybe he will tell them that he was their creator, thus their master. But making himself their master will certainly not convince them to follow him, just as Kuja was doing everything to throw his own master down. Or he could go with the simplest manner to threaten to kill them if they were to disobey. There were infinite amounts of ideas that might work or not.

When they reached the dead forest, Kuja was pleasantly shocked to see that there was a hidden lush forest in green in the middle of nowhere. The illusion to make the surrounding completely dead with no life was more than just an optical illusion but a magic beyond his imagination. Did the Black Mages truly develop this hidden world with their powers? Within this living forest, some cutely designed, yet rustic huts were erect around a small flowing river with birds and butterflies soaring around at leisure like they were part of this town too.

And to Kuja's great surprise, Black Mages walked around, laughing and communicating of nothing and everything, just like normal Gaians with their peers. This small town was a paradise of calm and peace with a harmonious community, each mage tasked with a responsibility that made up a fully functioning society.

How had they gained sentience? Was this because they were produced from the Mist made of lost Gaian souls? Was this why no Genome had ever found their own "core" unless artificially infused with a soul like Kuja and Zidane? Kuja could not tell, but this was a miracle.

As they continued to spy on the village, the brothers stumbled upon what looked like a cemetery. The Black Mages had enough self-awareness to mourn their dead. Showing respect to the dead might be the ultimate demonstration of possessing a soul.

So, Zidane did tell him the truth about soulful Black Mages.

Suddenly, a shiver ran across Kuja's skin.

The sight of these erected crosses and tombstones reminded him that he had set a limited lifespan on these former puppets in case an emergency were to come on them. The whole Black Mage conception was inspired by the work of the past living Terrans and the old man he utterly despised.

What if…

What if Garland had set up a short, limited time on his precious Angels of Death too?

No, that was impossible… Kuja knew that he and Zidane, as Genomes infused with a soul, were made to be mortal, just as the Genomes were programmed to become mortal after they will receive their souls. But to this day, Kuja had reached his twenty-fourth year. It was surely much longer than what he had set on his Black Mages…

Yes, this was it. He and Zidane were set to live more and more years.

“So, what can we propose to convince them to work for us?” Zidane hushed to Kuja, rousing him away from his thoughts.

After shaking his head, Kuja replied, “They have a limited lifespan. If they are just like any Gaians, I have a hunch they are afraid of death.”

When the Genome brothers stepped in the village entrance, the Black Mages immediately noticed them and fear set in fast enough. They began to scream “humans!” at the top of their lungs and in the spur of their panic, they ran away to their home, hoping these tailed humans weren’t going to open their doors. It did not help that Zidane had already his daggers out of his sheathes, bringing more fear than bites into the village.

How odd. From all the fearsome and powerful Black Mages they had encountered during the genocide, the brothers had expected these mages to have, at least, put up some fight and struggle. Just as Kuja had hypothesized earlier, these sentient Black Mages seemed more innocent than they looked.

Well, it appeared Zidane didn’t need these daggers after all.

However, there was one Black Mage who stood still ahead, maintaining some distance and giving the brothers a doubtful stare. Unlike his other peers, this one must not be afraid of them. He held a tall metallic staff which suggested he might be the leader of the village or at least the bravest one.

“Who are you?” the Black Mage asked them when Kuja stepped forward, with Zidane following behind.

Chuckling at the question, Kuja responded, “Can you not remember the one who has created you? How sad. And there I thought I could have an amicable dialogue with the fruits of my years of work.”

The frown on the mage’s blank face implied that he did not expect their meeting to remain friendly. His voice gaining a hoarser, harder tone, he called, “Kuja. I have heard of your name. You have conceived us as tools of war, we were created to kill. You probably did not expect some of us to gain ‘self-awareness’, am I right? Now, are you expecting us to go on and praise you for giving us a life for a single sad purpose to kill?”

“Oh no, I’ve enough praise,” Kuja commented, granting him an impish smile. “No, I am here to make an offer that you cannot refuse.”

Despite the invisible facial expression, they saw the hardening frown on the mage. “We’re not interested.”

“Shut up! Let Kuja finish his offer!” Zidane stepped in, dragging his unsheathed dagger an inch away from the Black Mage’s face who was startled by the move. The mage took a slow step back, but the frown on his eyes remained.

“So, the feral little brother speaks,” the mage said, and Kuja detected a faint mockery. At this, Zidane started growling at him but he retreated closer to his brother.

“We know of your short lifespan,” Kuja revealed. A twisted satisfaction came to him as he noticed the subtle change on the mage’s facial expression that softened at the single mention of ‘lifespan’. Kuja had now caught his full attention. “As I am your creator, I also know the way to prolong your lifespan.”

Silence reigned for seconds to which Zidane lost patience, wherein he grumbled and kicked the

ground, now back behind his brother. The Black Mage gave them a hesitant glare but he soon broke the awkward silence. “What are you insinuating? Surely, you won’t do this without an exchange,” the Black Mage asked, his voice now adopting a more aggressive and protective approach.

“Come work for us!” Kuja suggested, his arms wide open with excitement like he welcomed him in their world. “If you accept to work for us, I will grant you a long humane lifespan! Just imagine the possibilities! You will live long years in prosperity!”

“***That sounds like a bunch of lies,***” Zidane uttered in their connected minds. “***You just made up everything, right?***”

“***You’re catching on fast,***” Kuja responded as he continued to stare at the Black Mage, waiting for an answer.

“***And I think this Black Mage’s catching on your bullshitting too.***”

“***Probably, but hope is all that’s left on them, and I am providing them the hope they covet.***”

The brothers were right. The mage stayed mute to his stance, his glare never leaving them. He did not flinch from his pose, but this might suggest he was

in deep thoughts from Kuja's proposition. However, sounds from behind the mage caught the brothers' attention as more Black Mages slowly made few steps forward, their bright eyes over their blank face filled with curiosity and, of course, hope.

His offer was all it took to pull them away from their hideout, just as Kuja predicted.

"You'll… make our lives longer?" one of the Black Mages asked, his tone all shy.

Giving them a softer gaze, Kuja gently beamed at them and began, "Why would I come all the way here to propose this? This is because I am telling you the truth."

All the mages looked at each other whispering among themselves. Some were looking excited about the news while others remained as skeptical as their "leader". After long minutes of discussions bursting with arguments of the idea of working for the famous Tailed Brothers…

They accepted the deal.

Having the Black Mages as servants in the Desert Palace had become a convenient routine for the

Genome brothers. Thanks to them, both no longer had to proceed with boring home tasks, be it dusting the place or getting rid of unwanted monsters that sometimes roamed in their dwelling. To Zidane's disappointment, however, none of them could really cook at the impressive levels of their former servants in Treno or the royal chefs of the Alexandrian court. Nevertheless, the brothers now had more times for themselves and life at home had become less dull, except for today.

"Geez, it sure is boring around here."

Pumped to workout outside again despite the current raging sandstorm, Zidane jumped around and poked at Kuja's tail as the elder looked busy testing some of his new spells on another monster that found itself inside their home. Kuja paid no heed to his sibling's attempt to get his attention, being more focused to see the monster die in some quick death from his magic. After all, the quicker they will kill Garland, the less time the old man will be granted time to rebut. If they were to fail to fight him with their new Eidolon, then they will have to rely on their own strength.

"My boy, this peace is what all true Gaians strive for," Kuja said after he was certain his foe had died,

in response to Zidane's boredom. "It makes me wonder what Garland's up to, on Terra."

While Kuja returned to his magic training, Zidane turned away, intended on trying to find another roaming monster around the palace. However, before he could even cross the door, a Black Mage burst in with a letter in hand. The mage appeared rather excited about the subject of the letter as he waved it at the brothers. "Woah, calm down, No. 150!" Zidane exclaimed and he caught the mage's shoulders to appease him down. Whenever Zidane called them with their proper name, it brought a smile to Kuja. How the boy was able to discern all of them despite their near identical appearances was beyond Kuja's knowledge.

"Master Zidane! Master Kuja!" No. 150 called, giving the letter to Zidane as he began to read it. "A Moogle from Mognet has just sent a global announcement to everyone on Gaia! Princess Garnet and her minions have sized their occasion of peace to plan a coronation! Princess Garnet will become a Queen!"

"Hm?" Kuja turned away from the mage, now wanting to ignore him. "How can we help into this? Do you really think acquiring this enemy's

knowledge will help into our quest to defeat that old man?”

“Heh,” Zidane huffed. Whenever the discussion of his past crush came, his reaction differed each time, always surprising Kuja and the other Black Mages. This time, he looked rather irritated and furious. “Guess it’s written somewhere that only Kuja can ruin Garnet’s coronation, so that’s why No. 150 came to announce it to us?”

Strangely, the joke seemed to have brought some ideas to the elder sibling. Deep in thoughts, he had not noticed that Zidane had bounced before him to wave at his face, prompting Kuja to shake his head out of his reverie. “Hey, tell me what’s up!” Zidane exclaimed after his brother.

“Oh, I apologize,” Kuja said and blinked at the boy. “Pray tell, Zidane, how can you find so many brilliant ideas on the go?”

Taken aback, Zidane uttered a “What?”

“We’re going to ruin the Princess’s coronation, of course.”

Now, the young man was sulking with disappointment. “But why?” he asked as if he was protesting against the idea.

The elder chuckled. “Why not? It shall be fun. You, of all people, love to have fun.”

“Just leave Garnet alone.”

Well, that love-hate feeling he manifested for the Princess was still taunting him. What did it take to Zidane to stop clinging to that girl, even after knowing that she will never forgive him for his implication in the war against Burmecia and her parents’ deaths? But of course, Kuja knew a way. It was the easiest way to deal with these prolific problems.

You get rid of them, and this was exactly what Kuja intended to do with that girl.

“I’m not going to kill her,” Kuja reassured Zidane with his lie. “I’ll just ruin her coronation and that’s all. Why are you so intent on protecting her? I no longer request you to protect her. We have her Eidolon. She hates your guts. She hates us for all these senseless genocides. She despises us for ruining her family. She does not deserve your protection anymore.”

Zidane did not say anything. Instead of letting his anger boiling stronger, he stormed off in silence.

Somehow, watching him so angry left Kuja with some discomfort.

The night before the coronation, when they expected the area to be bursting with life, the streets were quiet and emptied of living things. Feral pets, wandering critters and even the small rodents had vanished as if the townsfolks had been busy cleaning up the streets for the new Queen’s ascent.

Yet, by the statues of the main city’s entrance, they were met by two unexpected runaways. When Zidane spotted them, he launched at them with his daggers ready to cut them into pieces. Before them, the former royal jesters shrieked at them as they leaped into a frightened hug. It did not take long for Kuja to convince them to accompany him and work for him. After all, Zorn and Thorn had nowhere to go, now that there was a warrant for their heads too since they had fully agreed to become the Princess’s Eidolons extractors for more wealth.

As they had become new servants of the Tailed Brothers, Kuja ordered them to escape the town, which they promptly did.

Interesting, though. While it was scarce and rare, Kuja felt the remnant of the Mist present in the air. This was not enough to plant a Black Mage factory in this place, but this was more than enough to fabricate bigger monsters, these same Mistodons that he had created back on the Iifa Tree. If he could give some scare and perhaps death to the sleeping folks in this city…

How amusing, to think of the idea of waking the folks from their sleep, only for them to face ugly, scary monsters to accompany them in their rude awakening.

When Kuja combined enough magic power, from a snap of the fingers, a dozen of Mistodons formed from the scattered Mist. The undead beasts began to roar, waking the citizens from their torpor and triggering screams and panic to stem across the town in mere minutes. When there was enough commotion for people to run for their lives, this was when Kuja thought he was ready.

Ready to use his biggest weapon, the legendary weapon he had stolen, to destroy this city.

“Come forth, O Bahamut!” the silver-haired young man cried to the sky, arms above his head.

At the same time, the eye of the Invincible shined crimson bright among the dark cloud, disrupting the misty sky from its peace. Its single eye shot a glare over the castle before the great dragon appeared from it. The roar that echoed through the city was enough to stir the rest of its inhabitants from their slumber wide awake, all in shock and terror. The screams and bawls surrounding sounded like music to Kuja’s ears.

When the Mistodons shredded some townsfolks and houses around, the giant dragon spitted huge beams from its mouth, destroying entire areas by itself and killing all living things around. Wreaking havoc in all directions, Bahamut continued to shoot blasts at everything to please the master who had summoned it. Kuja observed and admired the fruits of his years of researches and efforts, the apocalypse prompting cries and misery that will bring this planet to ruins. This enjoyable spectacle was so much his tail bristled up with an odd rush and with the cathartic joy of the same fate that will await his damn creator and master.

How he will enjoy watching their old man suffer for having tortured his little brother’s mind for years. Alexandria’s destruction was only a foretaste of what was to come.

However, when his stare darted to where his sibling stood, the enjoyment that spread through from the inside abruptly left him.

Right. Zidane had his stare directed straight to the eye of the Invincible, that terrifying thing controlling the Eidolon on rampage. Yet, what seemed peculiar about the way he stared at the eye was how unfazed the boy was, like none of the destructive chaos and mess could even pull him out from his strange reverie. Perplexed by Zidane's complete lack of reaction, Kuja caught him by the shoulders, giving him the longest stare, trying to see through him.

There was nothing. Zidane's eyes were blank.

Like his younger sibling did not look very different from his soulless brethren, he seemed to lack all trace of emotions and worse, a core that made him the individual he was. It felt like looking at the eye of the Invincible was sapping the foundation of his soul. As panic rushed in, Kuja shook Zidane by the shoulders and tried to slap him away from the emptiness retaining him in this bizarre state.

"Zidane?" Kuja called his brother, worried. "What's going on? Tell me what's going on!"

Then he saw it.

A single tear streaming down Zidane's cheek.

…

"***This is going too far.***"

"***No, Garland. Kuja's only doing what's right for him and I.***"

"***The right thing. What do you know about what's right and what's wrong? You were created for only two purposes and that's all you need to know, Zidane.***"

"***No… I don't want to hear it…***"

"***You bring death to Gaia.***"

"***Stop it!***"

"***You bring death to Kuja.***"

"***No! I won't do it!***"

"***You cannot stray away from your purposes. These are the purposes of your existence. You are to become Kuja's replacement because he is a failure. He has gone too far into using the Invincible for his own personal goals. I will no***

longer tolerate him nor you to use what is mine for the wrongs of Terra."

"***No!***"

"***My Angel of Death, Zidane. You are my creation. If you do not comply, I will take back what is mine. Your soul will be mine again, and you will become a true vessel to be manipulated.***"

"***W-What?!***"

"***Don't you want to get a foretaste of this? Let me demonstrate another power of the Invincible.***"

"***Garland! Wait! Garl… G…***"

"G… Garland…" Zidane whispered, the life of him gone from his voice and from his glassy eyes as he turned away from Kuja and slowly walked ahead, straight to the escaping people who paid no heed to the Genome brothers.

Troubled over the prospect he might be losing his brother right now, Kuja caught him by the arm before he could walk out of his reach. "What's going on?!" Kuja cried after him. "Why are you bringing up that old man?!"

And it hit him that Zidane might just be having another one of these private telepathic conversations

with their dastardly master, something Zidane had no control over. Despite being held by the arm, Zidane still had not turned back to his brother like he had no care.

“K… Kill…”

What had Zidane just said?

“Zidane?” Kuja called him again, hoping to gain his attention.

Yet, Zidane ignored him again. Instead, while his eyes remained glassy and devoid of emotions, with a sudden move, he quickly tossed Kuja away before he drew his daggers out. Without even waiting for another move, he leapt ahead, catching a random woman escaping the grasp of Bahamut who instead found herself by the clutch of the tailed boy. Before she was allowed to scream, Zidane slashed with his daggers through her throat without hesitating, leaving her soaking in a new puddle of her own blood, triggering a bigger panic and more screams among the folks around. Unfazed by his surrounding’s terrified reaction, Zidane bounced on another citizen, this time an old man holding a child in his arms. With one clean move, the boy stabbed the man through his stomach, causing the elder to

drop the crying child and fall to his death on the ground.

Something was controlling Zidane.

Before Kuja was able to gather the time to think of the old man who he knew was responsible for his brother's demise, his soul still deprived from him, Zidane rushed to his older sibling. His bloodied daggers ready in hands, with no one between him and Kuja to stop him from proceeding with his two purposes of life, he dashed forward.

To bring death to Gaia and to bring death to the failed prototype.

As a distressed and disoriented Kuja began to think of a plan to stop his brother, Zidane had already leapt high in the air, a graceful jump made to land heavily on his target.

And as if time was slowing for the brothers, something brought Kuja to a stop.

For an instant, the moving image of his cherished little brother, the infant who had grown up to love him dearly, flashed before Kuja. The smile and bright, innocent round turquoise eyes shined from within like a burst of souls sustaining him. Kuja found himself facing the tiny child brother he came

to love and care as a part of his only family. Zidane's bright smile brought light and joy to him in this sad, dull place he used to call home, a place he wished to not return to, ever. Bathed in the sorrowful cold blue light, Terra offered nothing but misery. Zidane was the only warm light of Terra that could shatter the misery of being alone.

The smiling toddler jumped forward to give him the sweetest hug…

… the saddest of the illusions.

Kuja casted an immediate spell at a now all grown up Zidane. Before the teen boy could do anything, the Sleep spell began to take a toll on him. In the spite of the fast action, Kuja ducked away from Zidane's jumping trajectory, forcing his younger sibling to land straight to the dusty ground, head and shoulders first. When his bloodied daggers fell from his hands, Zidane's landing left him with an awful headache and several wounds on his arms and upper body. The Sleep magic amplifying in power over the blond Genome, the empty shell struggled to keep his lids open.

Near terrified to look at his young brother, Kuja took some hesitant steps and approached him, crouching over to check on him. A soon-to-slumber

Zidane glued his hollow glare at Kuja, the target of his ultimate purpose, suggesting he was still being controlled by the higher authority. When the boy finally dropped into his deep, cursed sleep, Kuja knew.

Garland was controlling Zidane with the Invincible.

That dastardly old man! What was he scheming now? How was he even able to control him? How could he stoop so low as to use the cheapest trick of controlling his greatest creation? Garland was not a god! Even these theoretical gods wouldn't do anything like this!

And yet…

Was controlling an Eidolon any different?

No, what if… What if Garland had implemented something in Zidane to make this control possible? What if he could control Kuja as much? Wait… that was impossible. If the old man was capable of such thing, Garland would have done so ages ago just to get rid of his failure as soon as Zidane came to exist.

Using distinctive frequencies made it possible to control special creatures like the Gaian Eidolons… and Garland's creatures. What if this was a feature

implemented in Zidane only…? Could it be that this feature was implemented the day when their creator had shoved them that telepathic feature, or was this applied from the day he had begun to conceive Zidane?

No! Garland, he had planned all this!

After having caught his brother in his arms, Kuja's attention rushed at something even greater than the sight of the massacring Mistodons and the gigantic dragon's destruction from the sky. Just gliding above the castle, a shining light blast momently blinded the city along with the grounding sounds of machinery and steams. Above everyone's head…

… a giant automaton of insane size and height beyond any living thing that had ever existed on Gaia came to life like a ghost abandoning its invisible, ethereal form. As its strange arms and body surrounded the castle, giant feathery white wings curled around to protect the castle from the destruction which Bahamut was bringing upon. From the legends he had read in the obscure books of the Alexandrian royal library, Kuja was quick to realize what this new gigantic creature really was.

The legendary Eidolon, Alexander, summoned by the Princess, or rather, the new Queen herself.

From any way or another, the young woman had gotten possession of all the lost fragments of the most powerful Eidolon to have ever crossed Gaia's history.

When Bahamut noticed the new threat, it abandoned the city and went to shoot numerous beams at Alexander. However, the beams shot through nothing as the giant wings of the much bigger Eidolon provided the ultimate protection, leaving the castle with no further damage. Frustrated, the great dragon converged its magic power for a bigger blast, which still could not damage the impenetrable automaton's wings. Before Bahamut thought of another plan, Alexander had already compiled all its power to shoot a dozen of much more threatening beams at the feral dragon. Realizing it was no match for the more powerful, legendary Eidolon in both size and power and desperate to avoid the beams aimed at it, Bahamut tried to escape, only to be struck by few blasts. To save its own skin and scales, Bahamut vanished into nothingness.

And at the same time, on the ground level, all the Mistodons were defeated by the Alexandrian infantry at the cost of many.

Alexandria was saved, but severely wounded.

While the defeat of the Mistodons went in the span of longer minutes, conquering Bahamut happened in a matter of seconds. These short seconds were enough for Kuja to be convinced of the extent of the Eidolon Alexander's powers, and yet, this was also enough to make him realize he had forgotten something. All this had been so shocking Kuja had forgotten about what was happening to his now unconscious brother.

With the Mistodons and Bahamut gone, he noticed the furious villagers coming at them with pitches and forks for what Zidane had done. With his heavy brother under his arms, fighting a large group of Gaians might prove to be difficult and he had to think of an escape route. Thankfully, Mahila wasn't far around and she came to catch the Genome brothers, allowing them to get on her back. She took off, leaving the enraged citizens below crying for justice.

It was only from the sky that Kuja grasped at the extent of Alexander's size and why it was deemed

the greatest Eidolon on Gaia. If only he could get his hands on it, then all the other Eidolons combined won't even stand a chance against it.

Oh, how Garland will be jealous!

Even if Garland could control the Invincible from where he stood, Kuja knew he might have the upper hand with the ability to control it from afar. He still had time to achieve his goal to be freed from the delusional old Terran android!

Rising his arms toward the Invincible, Kuja screamed, "Alexander, you're mine!"

…

Nothing happened.

He cried the order again, but to no avail. No frequencies were casted from the eye of the Invincible and Alexander had not budged its wings that were protecting the castle and its residents.

No… Had Garland…?

That old man had already taken the full control of the airship again, Kuja knew it! Garland had shut the link Kuja possessed to control the Invincible! So close to his ultimate goal, and yet, so far…

Just when Kuja resigned to his defeat as his focus was drawn back to his wounded brother, a new wave of frequency was blasted out of the Invincible's eye, right over Alexander. The produced shockwave was so strong it sent a surge of earthquake shaking the ground, destroying parts of the castle and causing the Eidolon's wings to wither like a drying plant. The giant automaton gave out a very loud, strange mechanical shriek before it started to crumble into pieces, disintegrating into dust and leaving the castle fully exposed to danger again. The Eidolon Alexander disappeared to the unknown as quickly as it came back to life, its imminent defeat leaving awful scars all over the Alexandrian structures and its people.

All his years of works, all for naught.

He couldn't just give up now! He'll find a way, another way to get rid of the old man once and for all.

Only then, Zidane and Kuja will be fully freed from Garland.

The Eidolons were the keys to their success. He'll find more of them, somehow.

Yes, this was the only way… Even if it will take more years…

Author's note*: Ok, I totally forced that Zelda CDI part in this chapter. Also, I don't remember the Black Mages' names except for their "leader" No. 288 which I can remember because it's a known code for a particular backup status at my job (I'm working in IT). 150 is also one of these special codes.*

I thought that if the Invisible can control and kill Eidolons, it certainly can control Genomes or some of them.

Chapter 21: Plan

Vacations are awesome.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 21: Plan

What…? Home in the Desert Palace? What was he doing here?

Wait a second. He was supposed to be in Alexandria, doing things… Wait, what things? What were they doing there? What was he doing here now? Zidane turned around from his lying pose as he happened to be on some bed or something quite comfortable. Overwhelmed by more questions than answers, he struggled to think through, but trying to recall the events earlier was the most difficult task at hands, his short-term memory lost in some fog. His head hurt so much…

When he sat on the bed after giving up trying to remember everything, his blurred vision noticed a silhouette further away from which he could hear laughing for a reason unknown to him. This was not any kind of laughing matter. In fact, he detected the

faint sad strain in the voice of the man he recognized as none other than his own brother.

“K-Kuja…?” Zidane slurred, shaking his head to awaken himself away from what had appeared like a long slumber.

The elder sibling did not turn around, thus leaving the blond boy to ponder once more about what had happened earlier to lead where he was right now. Digging through his mind to find an answer, it was only by recalling the city of Alexandria again that he was able to recollect some events. There was that letter for Garnet’s coronation, their trip to Alexandria to ruin her coronation, the discovery of the two runaway jesters…

The rest of the story was lost in a deep pit.

However, he did remember being sad, and yet, he could not tell why.

“Kuja, what happened?” Zidane asked louder, trying to gain his brother’s attention.

Finally, Zidane’s call was enough to trigger a reaction from Kuja, taking him away from his laugh. The young man turned to Zidane who had expected to see a mad expression on his face. Instead, he faced the care and softness of his older sibling, the

same one he'd been so used to during his childhood. This had a calming effect on them both.

"You've awakened," Kuja commented, his voice remaining stoic. To a stranger's ears, that tone would have sounded cold, but Zidane spotted the familiar, subtle care in his intonation.

"Kuja…" Zidane began, shaking his head and now passing his hand through his hair like he'd been exhausted. He put his palm over his face, wincing and moaning from the heavy, yet light chaos messing with his mind. Forgetting everything was such a bad experience… "I… I don't remember a thing about Garnet's coronation…"

Kuja could tell from the despair in Zidane's voice that he had not been lying. Certainly, his little brother did not remember killing two random Alexandrian citizens either. He did not recall Garland's scheme in this as well. Most of all, Zidane could not recollect having been trying to kill his own sibling along this chaotic destruction.

And Kuja was not letting Zidane know all this.

"Did I do something wrong?" the boy almost bawled at the question, but Kuja put a hand on his hair, stroking him to reassure him. Even after these

years, Zidane had renounced on trying to convince Kuja that he was no longer the child coveting to be petted on the head.

“You did nothing wrong,” the elder sibling commented.

Of course, this answer was no way satisfactory to the boy. That reply even infuriated him to the point he tossed Kuja’s stroking hand away from him, startling the elder for a moment. “I can still feel the Sleep spell effects on myself,” he revealed and this prompted a cold rush of goosebumps spreading across Kuja’s skin. “You did this to me, didn’t you? There must be a good reason for this.”

“And this is the good reason why you did nothing wrong,” Kuja continued Zidane’s sentence.

Fists forming and hitting the mattress like he’d been thrown in an abrupt fury, Zidane gave a cold glare at Kuja. “You put me to sleep for I don’t know how long. You brought me back home, miles and miles away from Alexandria. I can’t remember a thing and I certainly have the right to know the answers to my questions.”

The low growl that followed his words nearly gave Kuja his scare. The last time Zidane had ever

growled at him like this was years and years ago, when the boy was only a tiny child barely born in this world, when he could not control his own instincts. This was back when the toddler would have attacked anything moving, including his own family.

“Fine, then,” Zidane said when his growls stopped. Having kept with the fury of his stance and yet still calm, he had resigned on getting an answer. ‘You might not want to tell me, but I’ll find out eventually.’ He had expressed it with such a serene, yet frustrated calmness that a strange smile crept to his lips, much to Kuja’s relief and surprise. “Then, tell me what you were laughing about when I woke up.”

Just as the relief had come, it had escaped as quick with Zidane’s second request for an answer. No, Kuja wasn’t going to admit this. He wasn’t going to admit that he was afraid of the failure of their plans, of everything they had brainstormed since their existence. What if everything for his entire twenty-four years were done for naught? What if, in the end, whatever results will emerge from it, their soul will be lost, whether it will be by Garland himself, or something that had been implemented in them in a way or another since their

creation? What if that something within will be triggered by some events, unbeknown to them? What if Garland will simply decide he will have enough and will use the Invincible to control both Genomes like mere puppets?

After all, back in Alexandria, Zidane had appeared no better than any of their soulless killer Black Mages.

And this was exactly why Kuja had been lost in a mad laugh. They lost their Eidolons. They lost control of the Invincible. The idea that their lives and plans might have been all for nothing for twenty-four years was the saddest joke of his existence. How will he even tell this to his brother?

“I apologize for my ridiculous laughing matter earlier,” Kuja decided to say and Zidane frowned, still wanting a clear answer. “I am simply afraid.”

Now, that answer shocked Zidane. Taken aback, the boy asked, “What do you mean? Afraid of what?”

“Of being a failure.”

Now distress seemed to have hit the younger one. Seemingly outraged by the claim, Zidane gazed back

at Kuja. “You’re not a failure. Why do you think so?”

What if… all this has been planned by Garland? What if… I am truly a failure for not seeing all this?

How Kuja wished he could tell this, and yet…

“I don’t know.”

The words Kuja wanted to say did not come out. He had to play the clueless one. The truth of Kuja’s fear will only cause Zidane to sink further into discouragement. Disappointed by the answer, the boy turned away, not determined to add another word to it. He knew how stubborn Kuja could be when it came to give a clearer answer to his questions. After all, sometimes, Zidane felt as stubborn… Perhaps he’d do the same if he was in Kuja’s place.

Kuja felt like he had to diverge the subject to something else, something that will get Zidane to be less aggressive.

“She’s alive, if that’s what you wish to know,” the elder sibling revealed, and this had brought the younger brother away from his frustration, prompting him to forget about the rest.

“R-Really?” Zidane exclaimed, finding it difficult to hide his enthusiasm. At this point, he no longer cared of Kuja’s reaction about her. If there was at least one positive outcome out of this, like Garnet’s safety, then it was all that mattered. “H-How’s she? Is she okay? Please tell me what you saw in Alexandria.”

Adopting his theatrical stance, Kuja turned to Zidane, his arms wide in a melodramatic move. “A miracle like a written play of Lord Avon’s greatest! The destruction from the Mistodons I have birthed with magic was naught against the summoning of the Eidolon Bahamut! As the creatures brought fear, destruction and chaos among the living, the impossible occurred! For the year pursuing the perfect weapon, it appeared right before my eyes as the legendary Eidolon Alexander, summoned by the Queen herself! It was such a shocking experience I was in complete awe! Can you believe it, Zidane? The great Alexander! How Queen Garnet has gotten her hands on the lost and latest fragment of this legendary Eidolon eludes me!”

The mad laugh from before came back to haunt the young man, causing Zidane to back away slightly. How did all happen while he’d been put to

sleep by his brother? Was this to prevent his little brother to see it all?

“Not only that, but Alexander got rid of Bahamut as easily as breathing! But this tale is far from over! That dastardly old man, Master Garland! Oh! That despicable personage, he stole the Invincible from us and destroyed Alexander as quickly as it had appeared to us, all before I could take control of it! All these times planning Master Garland’s downfall, all for naught! All our plans, down the drain, cleared by a single move from our creator! Our life is a joke, Zidane! A joke!”

Was everything that had happened truly the reason behind Kuja’s madness? Why had Kuja hid all this from Zidane, then? Was it why, for Kuja to put him to sleep to avoid seeing years of work down the pit?

Still, the boy was more than disappointed to have missed it all…

Eidolons, Summoners, Girls…

“Hey, Kuja,” Zidane began, a shy smile appearing across his face. “You probably haven’t seen her yet, or you didn’t notice during Garnet’s

encounter in the Iifa Tree, but… I think you can still get Eidolons from that girl."

A moment of quietness reigned. Kuja dropped his melodramatic act, all his limbs and tail down like heavy weight with a state of shock. Zidane was surprised his comment had caught his brother's full attention. The only thing moving from Kuja was his silver tail shyly curling outward as if unsure about the revelation. He blinked at his younger brother, having not realized the extent of Zidane's comments. "W-What?" Kuja stuttered, mouth agape. "Do you mean the Queen?"

"Eiko."

Kuja gulped at the name. "Ei… ko?"

"Oh right, so you don't know her." Zidane's smile grew wider and his eyes shined with joy. "Kuja, you know, when I've spied on the group in the Iifa Tree before they put me to sleep, I saw that little girl with a horn. Garnet and her crew found a little Summoner girl from Madain Sari. I could feel the Eidolons within her. I'm not sure if there are other Summoners and I don't know how she met the group, but… From her very young appearance, I'm guessing she was born from survivors of ten years ago or something. I'm pretty sure from your tale

that… Alexander's latest fragment was in Madain Sari all along, and that's why Garnet was able to summon Alexander."

Kuja remained silent before he smiled again. "You… don't need to explain yourself," he said, his tone having gained some viler intonation. "That Summoner girl is the new key to our freedom. We will extract her Eidolons, and we will overthrow Master Garland once and for all."

The next day, Kuja came with an alarming realization.

With the partial destruction of the city of Alexandria, they no longer had access to the extraction altar in the castle, and none of the brothers could exactly remember the structure of the magical pattern needed to be painted on the flat ground. The book where they had found the patterns was certainly lost in the rumbles of the castle forever. To their knowledge, the only other known place on Gaia where the patterns were drawn were found in the far away Lost Continent, in the sealed Mount Gulug.

Kuja had made researches on the magic that was sealing the mountain entrance, which he knew to be of Terran origins. Having researched the Terran books in the Desert Palace, he had discovered, about two months earlier, the way to undo the magic seal. However, by the time he had found the solution, Zidane had already painted the patterns in the Alexandrian castle's dungeon from the book they had uncovered from the castle's library.

The new solution to this was the Gulug Stone, a Terran artifact which could be unearthed from another lost Terran vestige in a farther continent named the Forgotten Continent due to the lack of settling civilization there. The vestige was an ancient temple called Oeilvert, a structure the Terrans had created as a technological archive holding history and information of their old civilization. Like any sentient creatures, the Terran possessed the desire for their history to live on even after death, archived in libraries such as this one. Kuja and Zidane could have easily gone to fetch the stone by themselves…

… Only if it wasn't for this inconvenient anti-magic field that surrounded the temple structure, preventing anyone inside this field to cast any magic spell, whether it was blue, white or black magic. It probably was a protection means to thwart any

creatures from destroying the archive. With Kuja being a prominent mage with absolutely no talent with physical strength and ability, he realized it wasn't a good idea for him to go.

Sending the Black Mages to this mission was sending them to a collective suicide, with the monsters guarding around the temple having no problem to get rid of any intruders, whether they were Terrans or Gaians. Even if Kuja deemed it worthy to sacrifice few of his servants for a mere stone, Zidane was quick to object with the idea, seemingly having some kind of affinity with these mages he had learned to be fond of. It was also out of the idea to send their two newest recruits, the former royal jesters Zorn and Thorn as they were avid magic users who could not even wield any physical weapon.

They were left with one available option.

"Kuja, trust me, I can do this!" Zidane insisted before his brother. "I'm the only one here with the physical strength!"

Kuja responded with a shake of the head, "Whenever you've been on adventure alone in these latest weeks, you were close to become part of the

Mist. You cannot do this alone and I won't allow you."

Zidane was going to refute this but he could not find anything to counter with. "I've been reckless, I admit!" he protested but he had nothing to make up for his dumb mistakes. "But I promise I'll be careful this time! I mean, there's no one on the Forgotten Continent that wants our heads, as far as I know, right?"

This won't do. Even if he trusted his little brother into this task, even having the dreaded Epitaph monsters in mind, according to the Terran book explaining creatures guarding the vestige, Kuja was not going to renounce his decision for a greater reason.

After all, having lost control of the Invincible meant he could no longer detect the airship. This also meant that there will be no one to watch over Zidane, which should be the most important thing to check on these days. If Garland was able to use the Invincible to control Zidane again when no one will be present to keep a close eye on him, Kuja did not wish to know what kind of things Garland might inflict on him.

But once again, he must not let Zidane know about this.

“No, I will not allow you to go.”

For a split of a second, Zidane stopped being excited. He gave Kuja a long glare and the elder chose to ignore him by turning away. Soon, realizing Kuja was not going to say anything else about this unless he acted, Zidane went back to his agitated but angry acting. “Why not?!” he hollered with his fists hitting the table nearby. “You don’t trust me anymore or what? I’m stronger now! I’m an adult, dammit! I can do whatever I want! And even a normal adult can’t do this alone! I’m hardly normal, anyway!”

Leaving Zidane in oblivion seemed to have triggered desperation as to cause him to say incoherent things like this, which Kuja felt guilty of. This did not seem right, but at the same time, he refused to let Zidane fall into a bigger despair knowing he might become Garland’s slave once again, literally.

“You’re sounding less convincing and more desperate,” Kuja said, keeping up with his strict big sibling tone. “You might be an adult now by Gaia’s

standard, and yet, you still are a brat, an adult with the mindset of a bratty child."

"I'm not a child!" Zidane screamed after his brother. "I might be reckless at time, but I'm not a child, dammit! I don't care if it's just a matter of speaking and I don't care if you'll always be older than I am! Stop calling me a child!"

Silence…

How ironic for Zidane to sulk at Kuja's silence like a child pouting at a parent. Furious but tired of this conversation, Zidane threw himself in his arms on the table, half of his lower face hidden by his limbs. Giving a long sigh, Zidane did not want to surrender but he knew Kuja was right on few things. Yes, Zidane had already admitted that he had been reckless, that he might have been immature on things, thus why Kuja had called him a child. At the same time, however, Zidane couldn't help but sense like Kuja was refusing to let his younger brother go out of his grasp, like he didn't want to see the little boy he used to be grow up.

Just as Kuja did not get older in appearance.

Perhaps Kuja had the mindset of a caring but clinging parent, after all…

“Just… don’t go alone…” Kuja’s voice softened, being tenderer and caring just like the tone Zidane remembered Kuja had used often when they were younger. This had helped dissolved the frustration from the younger boy. “Remember, there are fierce guardians in Oeilvert. If you go alone, they can get rid of you. You’ll have to go with others.”

“With others?” Zidane raised a questioning eye at Kuja. “Don’t you think I can work alone?”

“I have forgotten about an important part in Oeilvert,” Kuja revealed. “There is a magic guardian made by the Terrans that is dangerous. They call it the Epitaph, a wonder that can create dangerous magical doppelgangers of its foes. If these clones are to attack their mirrored individuals, they will instantly kill them.”

“Wait, don’t you mean…”

“If it is to create a doppelganger of you and the clone attacks you, you will never leave the place.”

Lost in thoughts, Zidane wasn’t sure what to think about this. “Then who do you think can come with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then… Trust me,” Zidane said, this time more determined. “I can just avoid that thing! I’ll escape it! Just let me go there!”

“I can’t…” Kuja seemed to be losing his cool like he was the one getting desperate now, forcing him to say out of spur, “I’m afraid to lose you.”

The very comment halted Zidane into complete shutdown.

Stunned by such caring words, Zidane felt like collapsing on the ground to his knees, experiencing the gentle care he had coveted when he was a young lad. He struggled to remember the last time Kuja had ever said these kind words, but it’d been so long it felt like a lost memory. Yes, Kuja had manifested his caring affection from times to times, with soft strokes on his cheeks, hands and head when Zidane was at his most emotionally vulnerable times. However, gentle words were rare. These words offered Zidane better thrilling and warming effects than the caresses on his cheeks, the strokes on the head and the hugs. Words were to live for and they granted him some meaning in his life.

These words toughened his convictions to give up his life to save the brother he loved since he could remember.

If he could not illustrate his care often, Kuja still cared about Zidane like no one else.

“I’m not afraid,” Zidane insisted as he came forward Kuja, catching his hands. Kuja sensed the slight shiver from his brother’s hands with the gentle words. “You’ve been my guardian for years. I’d do anything to bring happiness in our family.”

They both began to shake, with Zidane having a sudden emotional outburst which he fought to tame. Kuja saw through this façade and, to soothe them both, he let the instincts dictate him, forcing himself into the warmest of the hugs. For an instant, Kuja thought of their situation as silly, but seeing that Zidane did not mind, even looking more than happy to concede into this embrace, Kuja welcomed his little brother’s head over his shoulder. When he felt the tightening of the hug from Zidane’s arms and his trembling body, Kuja rubbed his brother’s back.

Kuja somehow wished this thrilling happiness rushing through his veins lasted longer.

After they left each other’s arms, Kuja caught Zidane’s shoulders and stared at him for another while. This time, his eyes were filled with confidence and trust. The young man smiled. “If you want to make us happy, then wait,” Kuja revealed,

yet his smile was becoming wicked, like he caught the ultimate solution to their problem. “I have a plan how we will find the ‘others’ to help you in Oeilvert.”

…

“If the extraction was to fail, what will you do?” Zidane asked later the same day.

Kuja gave him the cold glare. “Why do you think it’ll fail? You were the one to come up with the idea.”

Zidane gulped as he just realized something. “But, Kuja, you were the one who said that a Summoner needs to be at least sixteen to survive the extraction process and for the extraction to work, and that girl obviously isn’t even ten.”

“I’m surprised you even remember something like this,” Kuja commented and then grinned. “But you remember it wrong. To be at least sixteen is needed to survive, indeed. Yet, is her survival part of your concerns? What if the extraction will proceed as normal, but her body will not withstand the process? We will still gain her Eidolons.”

Stumped, Zidane scratched his head. He uttered, “I’m pretty sure I remember it right. I mean, you

made me protect Garnet for six entire years just so she will reach her sixteenth birthday unscathed."

"That was because I was under the impression that you cared about her from the first time you set your eyes on her, so I waited," Kuja chuckled, and Zidane stared at him in confusion, now uncertain what to think of this. Kuja might be right about this but Zidane had never imagined that Kuja cared much about what he thoughts of others.

"Then why are you not going after her newly gained Eidolons?" the boy asked.

Kuja's answer sounded rather convincing. "These Eidolons were gained on the way. They did not come naturally from her birth and thus we can't get them."

"Oh, well, I didn't know that," Zidane responded with a shrug.

"But, if the extraction does indeed fail, then we will need to claim back the Invincible as ours. Master Garland must have brought it to Terra. By getting it back, only then, we will be able to take control of the portal to Terra and Master Garland will never be able to take control of anyone ever again."

The latest part rendered the younger Genome perplexed. Giving a clueless glare and few blinks, Zidane asked, “What do you mean by ‘control of anyone’?”

“The Eidolons,” Kuja immediately rectified his slip of the tongue. Of course, Zidane did not remember being controlled by Garland with the Invincible, and the least Kuja wished was for his brother to know this dreadful fact.

“Oh, that’s true,” Zidane commented, not catching the half-lie Kuja just shoved on him. “How do you suppose we can get back the Invincible, then?”

“Why do you think Master Garland had given me the brain potential? To plan things, of course,” the silver-haired young man exclaimed, giggling at his own comment. “Indeed, I have a plan for this. This is now the time for a certain woman to shine.”

Once again lost in confusion, the younger boy blinked at him. “Dagg… Garnet?”

“Hildagarde Fabool.”

The answer shocked Zidane. “Huh? What about her?”

“Simple,” the man bragged his idea, looking at the ceiling with dramatic open arms. “Because there is a warrant for our heads, I am certain the Queen and her companions will try to retrace us on this continent to end everything once and for all! As long as we both strive in their world, they will feel their world threatened by us! I have a hunch they will ask the remaining Black Mages in their village about our whereabouts. They will be drawn to the desert and they will find the only ground entrance by the quicksand. We will capture and send them to Oeilvert with you while keeping half of their friends as hostage! Most of them are too stupid to learn magic, so that’s everything about convenience for you!”

Zidane grinned at the tease. “Are you implying that I’m stupid?”

“I never said such things.”

“Still, this has nothing to do with Hilda.”

“I’m not there yet! Quit interrupting me!” Kuja contested. He took a long breath before continuing with his plan’s description. “Then half of the group will go to Oeilvert with you to retrieve the Gulug Stone. Just as they come back with the stone and we acquire it, we’ll have the jesters capture that Eiko

girl. We'll cast Sleep on the brat and we'll confine her with Hilda in the Hilda Garde I. Before all that happens, I'll complain to Hilda about how I hate Master Garland and how getting rid of our creator on our home planet Terra will be the key to get rid of us!"

"That sounds like a bunch of baloneys," Zidane laughed.

"It certainly is," Kuja responded with his vile smile. "With the Gulug Stone, we'll go to Mount Gulug and undo the seal with it. We'll bring Eiko and Hilda with us. We'll proceed with the extraction on the altar, whether it'll work or not, and when the group will come to us, we'll escape and leave Hilda to the group. Knowing her, she will tell the group about Terra and how to get there since, by then, I'll have already spoken about the clues to open the portal to Terra without the Invincible!"

"And how do you suppose we open the portal?"

"According to the Terran books, they will have to retrieve the four magic Terran mirror artefacts from an unnamed Terran structure not too far from Oeilvert, which can only be accessed with an airship like the Hilda Garde I or the Invincible. There, they'll learn about the four elemental Terran

guardians protecting the four shrines. It is in these shrines where they'll need to place the mirrors to open the portal to Terra over the Shimmering Islands."

"And that's why you need Hilda in this?" the boy commented, his grin having lost strength with more confusion. "Why can't we just go get the mirrors and place them in these shrines by ourselves?"

"The mirrors need to be placed about simultaneously all at once in all four shrines, so we'll need at least four capable individuals, with at least one in each location. I do not trust the Black Mages in this task and the jesters cannot be separated on long distance due to their true origins. That would leave you and I, and obviously, we cannot do this with only the two of us."

"Man, Kuja, how can you think so far ahead like this?"

"Do I need to repeat myself? Master Garland had created me as such," Kuja prided himself over this half-selfish comment. "When the group will open the portal to Terra, we'll sneak with Mahila and we can only hope that Master Garland won't find and notice us as he might be too busy dealing with the Gaian strangers like infesting rodents. With that

distraction, we'll claim the Invincible as ours again!"

"That sounds a lot for a 'simple' plan."

"Simple plans are too much for that little brain of yours, isn't it?"

Even Zidane chuckled at the joke.

Just as planned by Kuja, Garnet's friends fell into the quicksand trap.

As they fell down unconscious in the palace, the Black Mages reluctantly placed their former friends into enclosed cells, away from each other. Only Blank and the Lindblum's regent now-turned-to-frog Cid were put together. Using the integrated speakers in the cells, Kuja called the young man, forcing him to come join him for an "amicable" discussion. As Blank refused to comply, Kuja was forced to take a drastic measure to ensure the Human knew his other friends were held hostage too and they will meet their gruesome ends if he was not going to obey. Having no choice, Blank went to meet the tailed man alone where Kuja explained the task he was going to shove him.

Blank will be sent to the Forgotten Continent, wherein his mission will be to retrieve the Gulug Stone from the structure of Oeilvert, making sure to explain about the inconvenient anti-magic field surrounding the place. Kuja felt like a generous man by allowing him to board the famous Hilda Garde I, the only airship that did not use the Mist as a fuel. To make his mission safer, Kuja authorized Blank to choose three partners to help him. With the anti-magic barrier in mind, Blank decided it was wiser to choose his melee attackers, mainly Captain Steiner, the Burmecian dragoon Freya and that former red-haired employee Kuja finally remembered as Amarant Coral. Only when they'll bring him the stone, Kuja will free the rest of their friends.

"But I have another gift for you," Kuja added and Blank glared at him with a short grumble.

"What now?" the Tantalus young man uttered while tapping his foot.

Blank experienced a fast gust and the sound of something landing behind him. He turned around and he faced the younger tailed brother, his smile filled with pride and a certain mockery. Zidane dusted himself with his hands and tail before he drew out his daggers like he was ready for action.

“I’ll be coming too,” the blonde revealed as his lips curved up into a twisted grin. “That way, I’ll keep an eye on you so you won’t escape or stray away from your mission.”

Abroad the Hilda Garde I, Blank’s group was welcomed by a rather unpleasant surprise. Faced with the ones directly responsible for Garnet’s extractions, they were being bossed around by the two former Alexandrian royal jesters. However, unlike the other allies of the Tailed Brothers, Zorn and Thorn were being annoying to all to the point Blank was close to punch one of them.

Instead, the young man decided it was wiser to walk around the deck, having nothing else to do but wander or vainly have a discussion with the Black Mages present until they will be docked on the Forgotten Continent. During his free roaming, he met with the tailed blonde Zidane who was standing close to the front deck, where he put a spying eye on everyone. When Zidane was approached by Blank who appeared rather upset after an unsuccessful attempt at getting a response from the self-aware Black Mages, the boy had his arms folded, smirking at the young Human.

“You won’t get any response from them,” Zidane teased the man. “They’ve vowed to only respond to me and my brother.”

“Always your big bro, huh?” Blank tried getting a decent conversation with the feral one of the infamous Tailed Brothers. “While we’re at it and since you can’t really kill us right now, just answer my damn question.”

Zidane raised his head. With his chin up, he was looking down upon Blank like an inferior person. “What question?”

“Why did you kill Dagger’s father? You’ve never answered her about this.”

This time, Zidane had no need to hold onto this secret anymore now that the Mist Continent inhabitants knew, like a heavy weight off his shoulders. The thoughts of his past victims always brought a twisted smile over his lips as if he was reviving these purifying moments. He revealed, “It was necessary to get rid of him, for Kuja’s own convenience and agenda. The King was in the way to the Queen’s corruption. Without him, the Queen was nothing but an empty leader without rational thoughts. With the Gaians being so dumb to blindly follow the ones they call leaders, they will follow

the empty shells like Queen Brahne into her ridiculous orders like the genocides she coveted. Without the King, Kuja was able to influence the Queen to his likings, to force her to do the dumb things he would tell her."

The answer Blank sought was the same as Zidane's, but hearing the confirmation from the devil's own mouth was more than satisfactory. The young man chuckled with assurance. "So, Mr. Tribal, I'm assuming you're doing whatever Kuja is telling you," Blank commented with certainty and a mocking grin.

"Yeah," Zidane said too fast like it came all on its own which he soon regretted to say when he saw Blank's reaction to his answer.

Giving in to some laugh, Blank exclaimed, "Then you're no better than these 'dumb Gaians', always following an authority without question."

The hair and fur on Zidane straightened with anger. "What?!" he hollered.

"You're a mindless minion, following orders from your master."

Before Blank was even able to laugh harder, he was propelled hard to the ground by a furious

Zidane. The young Human landed on his rear in a thud, drawing the attention from the other Black Mages who thought it might be wiser to remain silent when the blond tailed boy was in a fury. Blank shook his head before he got back on his feet but the smile was still anchored to his face. When his eyes were darted on Zidane, Blank was facing his famous, dangerous feral side. Zidane was standing low and was growling at him with a long, frenetic breathing, his arms pumping up and down and his tail brushing wide left and right like he could attack at any time. If Blank was to provoke him again, he was sure to get a nasty punch on the face or something far worse.

“I’m no minion, dammit!” the tailed young man snarled.

Such a childish response.

Blank found out that deep inside, despite how dangerous and unpredictable he was, Zidane was a child at heart sometimes. Dagger had told him tales of the boy, that Zidane had lived his entire life as his older brother’s shadow, making him prone to ignorance and even innocence. Nevertheless, that did not stop him from mocking the tailed young man. His smile staying strong, the Tantalus thief

exclaimed, “My comment still stands.” After giving Zidane a long glare, Blank walked away as if nothing happened, ignoring all the growls from behind.

Knowing he had to give up this pointless fight against the Human, Zidane shut his growls and frowned deeper at him. The boy turned around, looking down and guilty in some way while trying to not think through Blank’s words. He refused to think through this. Kuja was all he had now, and he rejected the idea that his brother had been manipulating him during his whole existence.

This was not right.

“***And this is why you have to get rid of Kuja, my child.***”

For once, Zidane hadn’t been frightened by Garland’s voice in his mind.

“***Shut up, Garland.***”

“***Zidane, you know the truth. You’ve been questioning this for years. Yes, Kuja loves you like no one else, but this is exactly why he has been manipulating your environment. He does not want to be alone just as you do not want to be alone.***

This is why you cling to him like a suckling infant."

"***I'm not an infant!***"

"***No. You are no longer an infant. You are no longer a child. You have now bloomed to your full potential as an adult just as I have planned for my perfect Angel of Death. And this is why I no longer need Kuja.***"

"***I need him…***"

"***Do you really need him? You, despite being an adult now, despite knowing that he'd been manipulating you? How naïve you are, my angel. But desperate no more. You will be freed from his clutch soon.***"

"***W-What do you mean by that?***"

Silence. Garland must have cut their connected link.

Well, good riddance.

The walk to Oeilvert from where the airship had landed was infuriating and long.

Seeing how the Gaians were always trying to stay together as a group, Zidane realized they had the habit of slowing down for the sake of others. Frustrated by their slowness, the tailed boy began to walk and run faster. He was thinking of simply leaving them behind and abandoning them to reach the place first until they caught up with him as he did not care much for their safety. However, he had promised Kuja that he was not going to do anything reckless as he did during his previous adventures. For Kuja's sake, Zidane slowed down with the Gaians but he always kept his steps ahead of them.

After hours of long walk and listening to the group speaking behind his back, they reached their destination. What a pity, for such grandiose structure to be located in an area where landing an airship was impossible.

They got to admit. These special, almost organic walls of this structure differed much from the usual Gaian buildings. This truly was a Terran wonder like the chef-d'oeuvre of the Desert Palace. "So, we're here now. Where's that Gulug Stone your big bro's craving so much?" Blank exclaimed, his arms folded from the frustration and exhaustion. He did not care whether this structure was different from everything

he’d known and he did not want to lose time contemplating.

Zidane shrugged. “Can’t say. This is my first time here,” he admitted, and Blank gave him the furious glare. And there he thought the tailed boy actually knew this place so they could have gotten it over with faster. “We’ll explore and kill things on the way to find it, I guess.”

“Fine,” Blank exclaimed out, his chin up in his own snobbish way. “I don’t care what you think, Monkey Boy, but I’ll lead the way.” The young man walked with his friends to the gigantic entrance door, only to find himself unable to push it or make it move. Blank and the others tried pushing it, kicking it, punching it, but the door remained shut.

From behind, Zidane had his arms crossed, huffing some “tsk” at them for dragging this for too long. Fatigued to wait after them, Zidane walked ahead, tossing everyone on the way and using his hand to touch the door. A wave of magic field flowed through it and the door finally opened.

This was the same event from the Iifa Tree all over again.

“Man, are you magic or what?” Blank cried out to his enemy with a hint of jealousy audible. “How are you making these things work? It was the same thing in the Iifa Tree. Are you from outer space or something?”

The tailed boy did not respond and simply pushed the door, revealing another different world in the inside filled with nothing the Gaians had ever seen in their lives. All these technological wonders were beyond their knowledge, something that even the great engineer Cid must have never thought of. Unfortunately, guardian monsters filled the place and the party fought through them, leaving no time to admire these foreign wonders and technological artefacts.

Some strange machines even projected lights, moving pictures and unknown scripts, exhibiting what looked like an ancient civilization with much more advanced technology. Zidane called these projections “holograms”, but the others could not tell how the Monkey Boy came up with the term so easily. Did he just make up the word or did he actually come from this “ancient civilization”?

Only Zidane was able to understand the scripts and the scribbles projected on these “holograms”.

He gave the Gaians a vague explanation of what led to the ultimate demise of the Terran civilization. The Gaians asked him how he was able to understand and if he was from the ancient civilization too, but he remained shut each time he was asked these questions. Zidane chuckled at the prospect of torturing these Gaians with more unanswered questions. Being left in ignorance would leave his companions infuriated.

For another reason unknown to all but the tailed blonde, all devices in Oeilvert only became functional if Zidane was the one who used them, which included the devices needed to venture deeper into new paths and rooms in search of their stone. “You should thank me for being here!” Zidane prided himself to tease his companions. “If it wasn’t for my physical presence to make these things work, you would have not even gotten very far!”

“Yeah, right,” Blank spitted out of frustration. “Like we really wanted to be here.”

“Like the lives of your friends in the Desert Palace matters,” the Monkey Boy added and grinned.

“Like Dagger’s life matters.”

Zidane halted for an instant, but he reverted back to his teasing side fast. He had momently forgotten that Garnet was among the hostages within Kuja's grasp, but this had not mattered much to him as he had not met her when the Gaians had been captured.

Well, until Blank had mentioned her just now, the name ringed to his ear like a buzzing sound from his head. That bastard!

Yet, Zidane refused to surrender his emotive side for her. Even after everything, he still was unable to get that crush for her out.

Before they took another step ahead, they were stopped by another lone guardian monster. Alarmed by its presence, the group immediately drew their weapon out only to realize that it wasn't moving much. The monster seemed to be made of stone, so each of them took out a Soft which was known to be very effective against stone monsters.

Yet, before they could do anything against it, a magical mirror emerged from the ground before Zidane, completely taking him by surprise. The reflection on the mirror before him was his exact copy, but before it shattered into thousands of pieces, he could have sworn he saw a smirk that was not his own from his reflection.

That was when the strangest things occurred, when the stone monster opened its door to reveal something emerging from it.

Zidane himself.

Then something in his memory came to light.

…

There is a magic guardian made by the Terrans that is dangerous. They call it the Epitaph, a wonder that can create dangerous magical doppelgangers of its foes. If these clones are to attack their mirrored individuals, they will instantly kill them.

Wait, don't you mean…

If it is to create a doppelganger of you and the clone attacks you, you will never leave the place.

…

"I'm the real Zidane Tribal!" the doppelganger began to exclaim before it immediately launched an attack at the group. Even the clone's voice and vivacity seemed to have kept up from its real copy, and yet, it attacked the group without any sentience behind its mind. Zidane remembered well the words Kuja had told him about being dead meat if he was to meet the doppelganger's blade. The last he

wished was to find his death here while surrounded by his own Gaian enemies.

It seemed Freya had already thrown a Soft on the Epitaph which triggered an implosion inside it and it broke into thousands of smaller pieces, putting it to death. Unfortunately, destroying the Epitaph did not kill the clone creature as it began to slash through its foes, beginning with a confused Steiner who managed to push away the thing before it went to Amarant instead. Now having a decoy, Freya, Steiner and Blank went after the being together.

Yet, Zidane did not take another step forward, reminded by Kuja's warning and his own promise to not do anything reckless. When Blank was left few seconds of peace from the creature, he turned to the tailed boy, breathing tirelessly from his attack but confident about his skills. "Are you going to let your copy kill us without doing anything?" the young thief teased when a grin formed on his mouth. "You're afraid of yourself, Monkey Boy?"

Zidane hated being played with his temper. "What? No!" he contested, feeling outraged.

"Then come and help us defeat YOUR copy, dammit!"

Yet, Zidane had not even made one step ahead when his back met with something sharp with a great pain setting in.

For an instant, the world around him stopped.

His legs shaking, Zidane could no longer stand. Falling straight to the ground with the pain never leaving his back, he managed to turn around enough to see the doppelganger, its expression lacking all trace of emotion and compassion, its dagger in hands painted in crimson with his own blood. That wound in the back did not seem like a mortal blow, but there was something that was intensifying the pain through his body like a magical poison flowing through his veins and nerves. Stuck on the ground, Zidane limbs began to shiver from the pain and a sudden cold, his life slowly leaving him as he could do nothing but watch his clone attack the Gaians.

He had done it again. He had been reckless except he knew this time, Kuja wasn’t coming for him.

Zidane was not sure what to think of this. The poisoning flow had already begun to contaminate his mind and thinking became harder. Breathing was laborious, his lids were heavy, and his vision was all black now.

Was it his time to leave and join the cycle of souls…?

And suddenly, his life came back to him. The pain was gone, his body was filled with full of energy and he did not even sense the injury on his back anymore. Pumped, he launched himself from the ground to stand back, only to see Blank besides him with an empty bottle in hands and the rest of the Gaians inflicting the final blow on the mirrored creature. The doppelganger gave away a strident shriek before it lied down on the ground in its blood. When life left it, its body vanished, leaving no trace of its short existence.

Zidane recognized an empty Elixir bottle in Blank's hands. Had the young man truly saved him?

"You should thank me, Monkey Boy!" Blank exclaimed, his grin exhibiting some pride before he threw the empty bottle away. "If it wasn't for my friends and that Elixir, your girly bro would have cried for his baby bro's death!"

Frozen by the kind act, Zidane remained astounded, trying to think on what happened. Did Blank save him out of compassion?

“Don’t you dare to think I’ve helped you because I wanted to,” Blank added, and Zidane’s hope had abruptly left him as fast as it came. So, there still was no compassion from these Gaians. “I’ve only helped you because we need you to get the Gulug Stone.”

Still, without them, Zidane didn’t know if he could have done this alone. Yet, he couldn’t find the courage to even utter a simple “thanks” at them. With a humph, Zidane followed the group on their way to find the stone, trying to forget about this whole Epitaph incident. He simply hoped there was no more of them in this archive temple.

Their adventure eventually led them to a deep pit where they were able to find an oddly shaped stone that appeared like anything from the Terran emblems Zidane remembered from his home in the Desert Palace. From his instincts, Zidane somehow knew it to be the famed Gulug Stone Kuja had asked to retrieve. Only Zidane was able to bring life to the mechanism guarding the stone by a simple touch. Before he could take it, a chilling gale flowed through them from behind. When the group turned around to find the thing producing this cold wind, a gigantic airship floated above their head, adorned with a metallic dragon head with a long, magical

blade shaped like a mechanical sword. Despite being a complete mechanical creature, that thing seemed to have a mind of its own. Was this thing the leader of Oeilvert's guardians?

"What the hell is that huge thing?!" Blank cried as he took out his blade.

"I don't know, but it doesn't look friendly!" Freya cried with her spear ready.

Zidane somehow heard the thing like it could only speak with Terran creatures. "The Ark," Zidane said with a smile coming to him. The group turned to him but they were no longer surprised by what he said after saying so much new foreign terms during their trip here. "The Terrans called it the Ark. I can hear it speak. The Ark is protecting the Gulug Stone and we'll have to defeat it to get the rights to claim it."

What Zidane just revealed might confirm that he was indeed of Terran origin… "How do you suppose we can kill an evil airship?!" Blank shouted, exhausted of this whole trip.

"Just throw your weapon at it!" the blonde exclaimed, now having unsheathed his daggers and adopted his attacking stance.

This was going to be a tough fight, then.

The Ark began to blow some sharpening wind blades at the intruders, wounding them all at once. Thankfully, these injuries were light and all still had enough vitality to work out through this battle. Freya jumped high from her spot, rising above the living airship's level before she landed straight onto the giant vehicle. Amazed by the idea, Zidane followed her, jumping high enough to land on the decks below where Freya was. He launched himself high once again to join the dragoon, where both started to whack the thing's heart from within.

Amarant threw some leftovers weapons at it, keeping his distance with Blank joining him into trying to aim knives at it. Steiner found himself powerless as his heavy armor prevented him from jumping close to the sentient airship.

Nevertheless, within some times, the Ark fell and vanished to nothingness into a world of magic.

After an exhausting battle, Blank grabbed the now accessible stone and they returned to the Hilda Garde I together. However, as soon as they reached the grotto entrance of the Desert Palace, Zidane stole the stone and immediately head to the magic portal

leading to the palace, ignoring all the slower Gaians uttering curses behind him.

“I must admit, that was fast,” Kuja told Zidane as the younger sibling handed over the stone. Kuja gladly accepted it.

Zidane grinned. “It wasn’t hard,” he said with a shrug. “I could have done this alone, you know?”

“What a joke,” the elder brother huffed but laughed. “Nevertheless, we got the stone so we can proceed with the next step to bring the Summoner girl and Lady Hilda with us to Mount Gulug. The jesters should have captured her already by the time her friends will arrive here.”

Some minutes later, just as planned, the group arrived in a fury, now coveting to see their friends taken hostage freed from Kuja. “Where are the others?!” Blank shouted at the Tailed Brothers who seemed to have welcomed the Gaians with a malicious smile. If only the Gaians could smack these vile smiles out of their faces…

“Oh,” Kuja played along, almost giving out a coo at the group. “Friends? Oh, you mean my hostages!

You know, I've just had a change of heart. I've decided that they are no longer any need to us. Care to see for yourself?" The silver-haired young man took few steps aside, allowing the Gaian group to see the fence under their feet.

The group gasped.

In the cage below lied the rest of their friends injured and unconscious, waiting for the rising burning lava to drown the hostages into killer flames and dispose of them in a slow and painful death. Overwhelmed by the rage of betrayal, the group unsheathed their weapons at them. "We brought you the stone! Now free our friends!" Blank screamed at them.

"Zidane brought me the stone," Kuja corrected him and he laughed at them. "All you did was to accompany him in his quest!"

"This is the biggest bullshit I've heard in my entire life!" Blank exclaimed before a sound from behind saved him from more fury. When the group turned around, as they saw the door now wide open…

… their said captive friends burst in. This was when they realized that the ones inside the cage

were magical illusions.

"***Man, you're doing everything to trigger their anger,***" Zidane told his brother in their connected minds as a grin formed on his lips.

"***Certainly, I have to do so they will follow us,***" Kuja responded with a sneer.

"Where's Eiko?!" Freya cried when she discovered that the little girl was no longer part of their regrouped party.

When the Gaians turned back to the brothers, they were vanishing into a magical portal together to escape.

His hands shifting into fists, Blank hollered a curse.

Author's note*: I admit I have fun writing the "monologues" between Zidane and Garland, as cruel as it seems. On a side note, it took me time to realize that 'Oeilvert' is the combination of the French words "Oeil" and "vert", respectively "Eye" and "green" in English. I wonder if this is an allusion to the turquoise, almost green eyes of the Genomes.*

The Epitaph scene was added as a last-minute idea.

The scene where Kuja and Zidane argued about the whole Eidolon extraction was also kind of improvised. I was wondering why, in-game, Kuja didn't go after Garnet's new Eidolons even though they came in the form of stones. However, I can definitely say that Zidane was mostly right about what he remembered, for once.

I rushed the ending because I was lazy and the chapter was getting longer than I envisioned.

Chapter 22: Change

Short chapter is short.

Thanks for faving and reading!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 22: Change

They ordered the Black Mages to slow down the airship when they realized the Queen's ship on the ocean was too slow behind. After all, they had to make sure the group followed them.

As the twin jesters had no awareness of the Genome brothers' plan, they both went into panic when they saw their Hilda Garde I slowing down. They were going to yell after their tailed bosses until they saw the sudden fury on the younger one. Instead, they shoved their anger and distress on the piloting Black Mage who learned to ignore them. Their shouting soon turned into curses and insults, calling them simple, empty dolls created for war. Exhausted to hear their high-pitched screams, Kuja ordered them to shut up.

Trying to avoid all the commotion on the deck, Zidane escaped from the scene and went to check on their two hostages in their locked cabin. When he slipped in, he found Hilda sitting on the bed, keeping a slumbering Eiko on her knees after having tried to wake her with her own magic, all in vain. When she noticed Zidane in the room, her sight hardened on him like a mother who was about to scold him.

She spoke, “I can understand you taking me hostage. I’m a grown woman. But this poor girl here is only a child.”

For the months they had been keeping the noblewoman captive, Zidane had learned to respect the wisdom and words Hilda said to him. Over these months, just like she had been forced to listen to Kuja’s blabbering, Zidane had sometimes confided to her. This was something Kuja had not been aware, and Hilda had promised to not say to him a word of these confidences. Hilda had learned that despite being part of the “bad guys” in this tale, Zidane might simply be feeling lonely and coveting for emotional warmth. After all, from what Hilda could tell, Zidane’s cold demeanor had been crafted from Kuja’s manipulation.

From his confidences, Hilda realized it might be possible to save this boy from evil.

Hilda and Zidane's respect had become mutual since then and today was no exception. Zidane had listened to her soft, yet harsh words, and Hilda detected the faint remorse over his shy eyes. He remained quiet.

When Zidane did not give her any answer, the frown on her face grew deeper and more authoritarian like the leader she used to be. She asked, "Where are you bringing us this time?"

"Esto Gaza," Zidane answered, concerned over the tone she had been using on him. "You said you wanted to go there months ago, right?"

"Obviously, you're not going there for my sake," the woman added, her voice growing bitter with a sigh.

The young man gulped. "Not really."

Yet, there was a weak smile appearing over her lips. Making herself more reassuring, she said, "I like your honesty. I'm pleasantly surprised that you can even remember my former destination to Esto Gaza before you and your brother… well… took me hostage. Kuja keeps mocking you over your short

attention span, but you don’t seem as distracted as the others would let us believe. You appear to remember the more important things. You can even remember all the Black Mages’ unique names even though they all look the same, at least to me.”

This was so strange to receive a compliment once in a while from someone else than his brother. It brought a warmth to his heart and shivers down his spine.

“Whatever you’ll do to this little girl, please do not hurt her. Don’t kill her,” she begged, keeping up with the strict parental tone.

The warmth and shivers inflicted an aching pain in his soul. Zidane didn’t know how to respond to this feeling, but he made sure to proceed with Hilda’s wish because something, deep inside, told him this was the right thing.

Before he shut the door, he shyly murmured, “Okay.”

Unfortunately, they did not have the time to make a stop and contemplate the sumptuous architectural structure of the Esto Gaza temple.

At first, Hilda followed the brothers and their minions in their frantic escape from the Queen's group without questioning anyone. However, when she noticed one of the Black Mages stopping from his track few seconds to admire the grand light candles sculpture in the middle of the temple, she realized that these magical dolls weren't so different from the Genome brothers. Both species were created and conceived to kill, and yet, like any self-aware Gaians with a soul, they learned how to appreciate the beauty of things.

She couldn't help but stop for a moment too, experiencing a sudden sadness for these beings created for a single purpose where they should not have the freedom of choice. She contemplated their fates until she was pushed by one of the jesters from behind who yelled at her to hurry up.

They continued their way to Mount Gulug where Kuja used the stone they had retrieved from the far away continent to break the magic seal blocking their path to the depth of its cave. When they burst into the wide door to the dark, dusty cave, they discovered the ruins of a very old mining town which used to have been inhabited by the extinct mole people. Since some Terran vestiges were supposed to be found in its depths, Kuja concluded

the ancient Terrans might have been affiliated with these mole people.

After braving the monsters concealed within the ruins, they reached their destination at the bottom of the abandoned town where there indeed were some Eidolon extraction shapes drawn on the ground with scattered Terran patterns around. In spite of this pleasant discovery, something else picked Kuja's curiosity.

A door leading to a strange intact room with a bed and lot of nice furniture. What an odd place to find such a wealthy-looking chamber. Was the seal put in place to hide the Eidolon extraction altar or that room?

Nevertheless, the answer will wait. This was the perfect place to keep their royal hostage while they will proceed with the Eidolon extraction from the little Summoner girl. Zidane was reluctant to order Hilda to stay in the treasure room. Before he shut and locked the door at her, Hilda unveiled her stern glare at him, but the tailed young man could see the pleas in her eyes to keep the child alive.

Zidane offered her a nod of agreement and then he slowly shut the door.

The Black Mages remained further away from the altar and the Genome brothers kept a shorter distance from the twin jesters who carefully laid the sleeping Summoner girl in the middle of the painted patterns. As the ritual started and the jesters began their magic extraction dance with their chant, Zidane initiated a secret talk with Kuja. The elder sibling detected the distress in the message, much to his shock.

"***Don't kill Eiko, please.***"

Kuja appeared startled by Zidane's plea. "***Why not? It never occurred to me that you cared about others' lives.***"

Zidane swallowed. "***I promised Hilda to not kill her.***"

"***Lady Hilda, mmm?***" A sudden mad laugh escaped the silver-haired man so loud, even causing the jesters to lose focus on the extraction process and thus stopping their ritual dance. "***Zidane, I can't believe that after you've reached adulthood, you're still as easily swayed as ever! Was this how Master Garland had programmed you to be?***"

Infuriated by his brother's mockery and degrading comment, Zidane growled at him. "***Stop***

teasing me! Don’t bring the name of that damn old man to me!”

Clueless of whatever was going on between the brothers as they stared at each other with different facial expressions but without any words, with Zidane’s growl at Kuja to add, Zorn and Thorn glared at them, their mouths leaving a wide gap. “W-What are you doing?” Zorn asked.

“Looking odd, you are!” Thorn exclaimed after.

Their voice stirred the Genomes away from their telepathic arguing. Kuja frowned at them. “Insolent!” he shouted after the jesters, making himself threatening. Terrified, the twins hugged each other, trembling with fear. “You’ve interrupted the ritual! Keep going!”

“Y-Yes, at once!” the twins stuttered before they returned back to their magical dance.

While the twin jesters carried on with their ritual dance, Kuja folded his arms, staring at the slumbering, helpless little girl, never giving any thought that she was a mere child. It had been the norm of Gaian cultures to always spare the children when it came to harm people, but Kuja had no care for such petty things like pity. With a smile creeping

wide to Kuja's face, Zidane couldn't help himself but stare at his brother with a heartache. From the way the elder was observing the scene, Zidane was uncertain if the girl will survive the process. He remembered Kuja telling him that Eiko might not survive due to being so young, but if the girl had been able to fight through so many obstacles, then perhaps she wasn't as innocent as Hilda let him believe. After all, she was all on her own in a town in complete ruins. After accomplishing this feat at such a young age, he hoped to see her live to see tomorrow at least.

But was this for Hilda's sake or for the little girl's?

Being confused was so painful. Why were there so much conflicts beneath? Why was owning a soul so complicated?

Their ritual dance ended but there were no Eidolon gems out of the girl. Disappointed by the jester's failure, Kuja approached them and was ready to ground them like children. Zorn and Thorn trembled in dread. Kuja bent to their level, his calm aura hiding the rage burning inside him. "What is happening?" he asked them, the smile on his face

suggesting pure anger and displeasure. “How can you fail such an easy task?”

“W-We won’t fail you again!” Zorn began, hugging his twin with shivers.

“S-Succeed, we w-will!” Thorn stuttered after him.

Taking a step back, Kuja left a humph at them. “Good. Do not disappoint me again.”

The jester restarted their ritual dance. As the ceremony and chants went on, the Summoner girl’s body began to float and glow, the same that occurred during Garnet’s extraction. This earned some hope to Kuja, a hope that vanished as quickly as it came when the glow faded and there still were no Eidolon gems out. Drained of magical powers, the twins caught their heavy breath, tired from these failures of the extraction process. Frustrated, Kuja walked to them, ready to give each a smack on their face until the terrified jesters bounced back to avoid the strike, hugging each other again.

“This girl is too young!” Zorn claimed as sweat poured down on his face.

“Survive this ritual, she will not!” Thorn continued with the same tone.

“I could care less of her survival!” Kuja snarled at them, causing the jesters to jump of fright again.

What Kuja did not expect was to see Zidane launched himself between his brother and the jesters, tossing the little men away and giving his brother a cold frown before he burst. “You said you won’t kill her!” the younger Genome cried at him.

“I never said such things,” Kuja commented before pushing Zidane to the side, which the younger one protested against. “You were the one who said it, and whether she survives or not should be none of our concerns. Don’t you want to see our Master dead too?”

“Yeah, but…”

“Your ‘Yeah’ is the only answer I need.”

Zidane was about to snarl at him until a chirping, high-pitched sound took his attention away from his brother. When he drew himself to the direction of the strange sound, he found a furious small Moogle flying above Eiko, its face directed at the jesters who tried shooing it away. It feverishly shrieked “kupo” at the twins like it was protecting the little girl. “That thing came out of the girl’s pocket!” Zorn exclaimed.

“Get rid of it, we should!” Thorn cried out.

But the younger Genome was preoccupied by something far more concerning than the jesters’ worries.

Upon looking at the tiny furred thing, Zidane realized this was no ordinary Moogle. After all, no normal Moogles possessed such a tremendous amount of holy spiritual powers like this one. No, this was the power of something completely different from any faerie creatures or anything he had ever seen in his life.

This tiny Moogle was an Eidolon with a free will.

No, he wasn’t letting the fear of Eidolons get the best of him. He had to counter with something. He unsheathed his dagger and assumed his defensive stance. His sudden move surprised Kuja and the jesters who gave him a strange glare. “What are you doing?” Kuja asked him, questioning his defensive pose.

And this happened. A faint glow surrounded the tiny Moogle, a glow all too unfamiliar with all the ones present to witness the strange scene, freezing everyone on the spot.

The power, it was increasing.

With this, Eiko finally awoke from her cursed sleep.

“M-Mog?” she called the Moogle as she was having hard time being aware of her surroundings.

A strong gust coming from the Moogle pushed everyone out of its way, leaving it and the girl alone. Watching as its power grew in intensity, the Genome brothers thought it was wiser to get away from them, only leaving the jesters to deal with the duo. Thanks to their stupidity, the twins remained there, excited to fight off whatever was coming from the meager Moogle to impress their silver-haired boss.

Much to their demise, Zidane thought.

“Eiko, use ‘Terra Homing’,” the Moogle said, its voice having fallen into deeper octaves.

Having no idea what was happening but trusting her Moogle companion friend, Eiko lost no time and she called out on the new spell, focusing on the nearby jesters which she recognized as her kidnappers. Their environment changed and flashes of light began to swirl around the cave. In the middle of the chaotic dancing of the lights, a giant lion-like creature bearing the same colors as the former tiny Moogle appeared and let a blaring roar

out. It combined all the magical, holy lights around before sending these stacking beams back at the threatening jesters who could do nothing but watch their certain defeat. As the beams of light rushed through the screaming twins, Kuja and Zidane contemplated the spectacle in awe, watching the small Moogle taking form of this gigantic, all-powerful, mythical creature using a legendary power.

Yes, this was it. Kuja huffed a chuckle.

“So, this is the power of ‘Trance’,” he hushed and Zidane heard him.

“Trance?” the blonde asked, clueless.

Before Kuja was given the possibility to answer, Eiko’s friends reached to the altar, having witnesses the Moogle Mog turning into its true form as the powerful Eidolon Madeen and disposing of the jesters. As Madeen vanished and left its ribbon to its Summoner friend, it reminded Eiko that it will always remain by her sides, no matter what.

Infuriated by the whole kidnapping and the treacherous ways of the Tailed Brothers, Blank released his sword and pointed the blade at them. As

Zidane prepared to fight him, Kuja calmed him by catching him by the shoulder.

"***Don't fight them,***" Kuja told Zidane in their minds, and the blonde sheathed back his daggers. "***We've lost so much years into conceiving war dolls and running after Eidolons that I have never realized that all we needed to fight Master Garland was right under our noses the whole time.***"

"***What do you mean?***" Zidane begged for an answer but with the Queen's group going after them, he knew his answer will have to wait.

The brothers no longer paid attention to the group's horror when they found the twin jesters' lifeless bodies beginning to twitch and twist before they floated and approached each other. Having them disposed, it was finally time for Zorn and Thorn to merge back into their true monstrous form as one Meltigemini. While Kuja ordered Zidane to leave when the group was forced to face the new merged creature, the young man laughed at them. As the Tailed Brothers escaped, Kuja cried out, "This Moogle has answered my plea! We do not need Eidolons anymore. All we need is the power of Trance!"

During their escape on the back of their Silver Dragon friend, Zidane continued to beg for an answer to his question. “Kuja, you need to tell me what’s Trance, dammit!”

“Oh? I thought you’d know such a basic knowledge by now, considering you’re a fighter and all,” Kuja teased his brother, but Zidane was in no laughing matter.

“Stop messing with me!” the younger sibling snarled at his elder. “I’ve never heard about it before, for real!”

“Very well, then,” the older brother said before he laughed, infuriating the younger man. “I have read about Trance in a book before, a power that any self-aware being with a soul possesses, let it be a Gaian or Terran, meaning you and I possess the potential for it. However, not everyone will get the chance to use this legendary power. Under pressure and emotional outbursts, one can achieve the power of Trance, a power that will greatly amplify a person’s fighting abilities and magical powers.”

Zidane listened but he did not understand how they could actually pull off this power. Kuja carried on. “I have thought it was a mere legend at first because I recall a vague memory of it, where I have

witnessed one gaining such a tremendous amount of power to save someone from death. But it was only after witnessing that Moogle transcending into Trance to gain its true form that I realized the power is real and that all of us have the potential to manifest it."

This was when a memory hit him. Zidane remembered the dragoon Freya, back in Burmecia, where she had undergone a temporary transformation that had given her a huge boost in strength and magic. That glowing stance, her rising power along with her intensified emotional bursts were all the signs of the Trance Kuja spoke of. Witnessing the genocide of her kin was the catalyst needed to achieve that legendary power that had slumbered within her just as the power slumbered within all, only waiting to rise.

If only Zidane had been paying attention to this and mentioned about it to Kuja earlier, they might have not lost such precious times.

"But we have never achieved Trance before," Zidane commented, not giving more thoughts to it. "I mean, it's only useful if we can actually trigger Trance at will. If this was possible, that'd be so convenient!"

“I’m thinking about this,” Kuja responded, fingers on his chin. “Since we need an emotional outburst, we could work with the mad souls of the deceased to use them as a catalyst.”

“How do you suppose we find these mad souls? I’m pretty sure the result of the Mist is unusable for that.”

The silver-haired man chuckled. He revealed, “This is why we will need the Invincible. It has the ability to absorb the souls of the dead and keep them enclosed in its eye. Most of the souls of the Summoners and perhaps the ones that have perished around the Iifa Tree massacre and Alexandria were absorbed by the Invincible.”

“But how can we use them?”

“Did you forget what we are? We’re Genomes, vessels made to welcome the souls. Of course, we have our own soul as our core already, but if we can absorb these souls with their anguish and pain of having been killed and imprisoned within the Invincible, we’ll provoke an urge of emotions from them, and we’ll enter Trance.”

Zidane appeared stunned by the plan. He blinked few times in silence, uncertain if the plan was even

going to work. The idea of absorbing souls looked ridiculous and the concept of having souls other than their own inside crept him. This sounded like a bad written horror story where monsters sustained on the souls of the deceased. Will they ever have a personality change or something similar by possessing other souls? “That’s farfetched,” the blonde admitted. “But have you ever tried absorbing souls before? I mean, I’ve never tried, so yeah.”

“Perhaps now is the better time to try,” the elder laughed.

“***Yet, there is no need to try.***”

The younger Genome’s eyes froze wide open at the voice inside his mind before he frowned. Another one of these moments where Garland was bothering his more precious Angel of Death without trying to reach for his defect.

“***Shut up, Garland,***” Zidane responded to his creator.

To his shock, Garland did not add another word. From the six years since his master was continuously shoving him private messages to mess with his mind, this was the first time he actually shut up after Zidane begged him. Somehow, the blonde

feared his master's silence more than if he would have continued to speak with him. What was Garland's scheming now?

Was this a foreshadow of something far greater?

… Or worse…?

"Is something the matter?" Kuja asked, looking concerned after noticing the short fright on Zidane.

The younger brother looked away in thoughts. "It's nothing."

Kuja decided it was wiser to let it go as he suspected Garland to have something to do with Zidane's pain right now. He must not lose time to think of frivolous things. He had to think about the concept of Trance fast. How the old man will pay for their suffering and especially his little brother's pain.

…

"So, the boy does not remember the event of twelve years ago. It is no surprise. He was only a four-year-old child at the time. No Gaians or even ancient Terrans can remember much of their early childhood. This is why Zidane is the perfect Angel of Death."

Garland moved away from his thoughts, having finished his monologue in front of a young tailed girl which he had conceived some months ago. The girl stared at him, and unlike her peers, her eyes were filled with life. With her presence, Garland huffed a weak laugh before he said, “You are going to meet your siblings soon. Get ready, my dear Mikoto.”

Author’s note*: I know this chapter is short. I was super uninspired. Also, I have no idea how Kuja was able to “absorb” souls in the game to achieve Trance. I always thought that part of the game didn’t make much sense.*

Chapter 23: Home

I admit I didn't like to write the whole in-game parts. This chapter and on-ward ARE the parts I wanted to write. Also, the latest two weeks were particularly busy in real-life, so I apologize for the wait.

Also thanks all for reading, following and faving!

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 23: Home

The days following the events from Mount Gulug, Kuja studied the power of Trance. After hours of intense researches, he was confident his idea to trigger Trance at one's leisure will work.

Of course, he knew the most natural way of provoking the power was for someone with a soul to be overwhelmed with a plethora of emotions. Having this in mind, the concept of enduring so many emotions all at once seemed like a difficult task for him. Yes, he could feel distress, despair, fear, sadness, happiness, but the idea of having these experiences all at the same time was a prospect so

difficult to discern. He remembered having scolded or mocked Zidane sometimes for being so emotive, which always prompted the boy to be furious at him. Kuja never seemed to be affected by these same experiences.

So, using emotions to spark Trance was out of the way for him. Instead, on a technical and scientific point of view, absorbing the souls in pain will be his best bet. This was the only way to retain the Trance power long enough to throw their master from his throne and rule both worlds. After all, the natural Trance power was short-lived.

On the contrary to Kuja, Zidane didn’t seem very interested with the Trance concept, whether it was in its natural or its hypothetical “forced” form. This power seemed to be a bother to gain, being so random and brief. If there was a permanent way to gain Trance, then perhaps the power would be more of interest. This was too much efforts and he didn’t understand why Kuja was so keen to gain that power for himself. However, if it took this ephemeral power to push them closer to their dreams of being completely freed from that old robot man, then he will proceed with Kuja’s plans. Only then, they won’t need to grip onto that thin thread holding

them to their freedom of having a soul since there will be no one to take it away anymore.

Free of Garland, what a nice thought.

And to Kuja's private satisfaction, Garland won't be able to take control of Zidane's soul ever again.

Speaking of the devil, Zidane had just come back from his stroll with Mahila. Unlike most of the time the boy came back home, he appeared happier and more excited with his upcoming announcement. "Hey, Kuja, I've got some news!" he exclaimed.

"Please tell," Kuja said, sounding cold but nevertheless intrigued to hear the news.

Zidane bounced before him, all pumped to the point the tip of his tail was bristling up with excitement. "I went to spy on Dagger's group. So, they went to that Terran castle without a name, and they found the four mirrors and they know how to use them to get back to Terra! I have no idea how they were able to read the Terran scripts there, but they're going to the four elemental shrines to open the portal to Terra! Your plan is working! Hilda must have told them everything you told her!"

Much to Zidane's disappointment, Kuja didn't appear very enthusiastic. Offended by his brother's

lack of positive reaction, Zidane softly kicked him to the legs. Kuja did not flinch. Exhausted, the younger Genome complained, “Man! Ever since the jesters died and the Black Mages left us, it’s so boring around here! You can at least make up for their lack of presence!”

“You seem very eager with the idea of returning to Terra,” Kuja told him with a sudden, yet sad chuckle.

Taken aback by the comment, Zidane scratched the back of his head with a shy grin. “I… don’t know,” he admitted. “I can’t remember much of Terra or my life there. I don’t even remember what Garland looks like. All I can remember about Terra is a blue light… oh, and maybe these tall mushroom tree things made of rock.”

“Gaia’s crystal,” Kuja revealed, exhibiting a hint of melancholy. “The blue light is the blinding glow of Gaia’s crystal. Looking at it will pain your eyes just as it would if you are to look at the sun directly. Terra is a bare land where nothing flourishes and everything is dead. You should just forget about this boring place, to be honest.”

The younger one frowned at him with a perplexed glare. “Then why do you seek to rule over

the dead Terra, if you find it boring?" Zidane asked, folding his arms.

Kuja laughed at him. "Isn't that simple?"

"Hmm, no, that's not simple?"

"Of course, it isn't simple for the likes of you," the elder mocked. "If I rule over Terra as much as Gaia, this will mean Garland's complete defeat, all his five thousand years of works for naught. If we kill him, his entire legacy will perish with him, his purpose down the drain to never reappear. Isn't this aspect magnificent? He will get what he deserves for making us his pawns, for creating us as his Angels of Death."

"Oh…" was all the boy said.

The silence reigned for another awkward minute with each brother looking at nothing in particular. With no other words to add in this discussion, Kuja returned to his books and Zidane decided to annoy him by poking his brother's tail like a cat. The elder sibling tried shoving the younger one away with his appendage, not bothered to turn around. "So," Zidane began, still poking his brother's tail. "When are we going to Terra?"

“When, do you ask? When the Queen’s group will defeat the four guardians of each shrines, that’s when.”

“But how will we know when they will defeat them?”

Kuja clasped his book shut, keeping himself a moment of silence before he turned to his brother with a confident smile. “We’re going to spy on their activities, of course,” he said.

Startled by the response, Zidane asked, “Now?”

The elder giggled under his breath. “Now.”

Following the new and improved Hilda Garde III across the continents could have taken a toll on their Silver Dragon. Thankfully, over the years, Mahila had been trained for faster and longer flights. Now, thanks to Kuja’s Haste spell, their trip went by faster than ever. With the Queen’s airship now hovering over the Shimmering Islands, the brothers and their flying companion waited for the portal to open.

At last, after what seemed like a long time waiting for the portal, bright beams of lights engulfed the airship. Everyone abroad the airship

found themselves gliding in the air and sucked into the portal. It was now the Genome brothers' turn to sink in this strange, chaotic entrance to Terra, wherein a mess of souls, wind and magic light led them to a trippy path. It felt so different to go through this path of light without the wall of the Invincible to protect them like they'd been used to years ago. Kuja was not pleased to go through this frenzied pathway to home, but Zidane appeared to be having fun crossing this chaos and he even hollered happy screams.

After a short descent to the pathway of hell and paradise, the three landed hard on a cold, rocky surface, leaving them dizzy on the ground for some time. Kuja dusted himself after this psychedelic descent to Terra and he stood back on his feet, trying to remain alert of his surrounding to make sure no one had seen them arrive on this bare planet. There was no one else around save for himself, their flying steed and his dazed little brother.

No more creatures. No Gaians. No other Genomes. No Garland.

Kuja sighed in relief. Perhaps the Gaian group had landed straight to Garland, leaving the old man too busy dealing with these foreigners like unwanted

pests rather than his own two angels. Reassured that no one else was around, Kuja went to check on Zidane and Mahila, both appearing particularly shaken by the trip. The dragon gave away a low and long growl before she was able to get back on her legs while Zidane remained stuck on his knees and palms. “Are you alright?” the elder asked while grabbing his brother’s waist to help him.

“I-I think so,” Zidane offered a weak answer, shaking his head.

When the younger sibling was able to focus to his surrounding, at last he gasped at the different environment making up this strange land. All elements bathed in a pure blue light, a light so bright and painful to gaze at it momently blinded him, causing him to collapse and shut his lids in pain. Whining from the ache and burning, teared eyes as he rubbed them incessantly with his hands, he was soon caught to the shoulders by Kuja who attempted to calm him. Thankfully, Zidane sensed the soothing rub from his brother’s hands. Kuja didn’t appear more worried than he should. “The pain should go away,” Kuja hushed to him, keeping on rubbing his shoulders to comfort him.

The boy opened his eyes in a slow movement, now able to contemplate the alien décor which suddenly became all too familiar to him. He recognized the big rocky trees, the completely still water of this death world and then all the strangely shaped rocks. After all, this land was the place he used to call home, the land where he had grown up as a small child. That painful blue light had awakened some of his reminiscences as if his old dreams were coming true now.

And despite all, even coming back after years, he still couldn’t call this world his home.

“Let’s go find the Invincible, then,” Zidane said, grinning at his brother to reassure him and Kuja chuckled back.

This was it. It was time. With an absent Garland, their plan will go accordingly.

As if Lady Luck followed their every move, some sounds of deep engines and electrical components glided over their heads. When they looked up, they discovered the gigantic airship soaring high with no one under its command. While Kuja could no longer control it from afar, he could at least board it easily with their dragon companion.

The smile on Kuja spread wider. They fell straight to their goal, how convenient!

As expected, the dormant Invincible was recovering from Kuja's uses of Bahamut and Garland's destruction of Alexander. Getting ready on their steed, the Genome brothers flashed toward the airship where they discovered an entrance at the top of the giant vehicle. In a matter of a minute, they were abroad the Terran war airship. Unfortunately, the size of their Silver Dragon did not allow her to board with them, so she left the boys to their business, content to explore this new world she, too, had forgotten about.

As soon as they burst in the Invincible, Zidane was suddenly taken by a bad intuition like something wrong was about to happen. Worried, he went atop of the airship to wish their dragon companion to be careful exploring this unknown land.

However, she seemed to have left already.

Well, she'll be back soon.

Perplexed, Zidane found himself worried of her, but he liked to think that she will find a mate on Terra or something. After all, there were Silver

Dragons thriving on Terra as well from what he remembered of Kuja's old Terran tales.

As predicted, no one else than the brothers seemed to be present in the ship. Kuja wandered around, trying to remember where to find the command room and the other famous area where the imprisoned souls of the deceased were kept. While he searched, Zidane trailed slower behind, checking his surroundings to gaze at the wonders of the Terran technology which looked so unfamiliar from his Gaian knowledge and even different from the devices found in Oeilvert.

Soon, he lost trail of his older brother and walked into a wide dark room filled with some strange pods with a central pillar. The pillar appeared to be a sort of control center with lights, circuits and buttons. This whole place reminded him of the healing tank room in the Desert Palace, but the ones here were different in appearance. The floor was painted with the Terran emblems looking like the patterns of the Eidolon extraction triangles, but this place wasn't used for extraction, he could tell. Perhaps teleportation?

And suddenly…

That odd experience of déjà-vu rushed through him with a wave of goosebumps across his body.

The image of Kuja behind that same control stand flashed, only to vanish as fast.

What was that? And, more importantly, *why* was that?

A profanity from Kuja caught his attention, bringing him back to the present. Zidane followed to where he detected the voice, trying to find his way in this labyrinth of an airship. He discovered his older sibling cursing and growling in frustration over a balcony in a grand room. Below their feet, a wide red orb glowed. “What’s the matter?” Zidane asked him, distressed over finding his brother so mad for a reason unknown to him.

“That damn Garland!” Kuja cursed again. This was so troublesome to find his older brother losing his cool so fast. “There’s not a soul here!”

“What do you mean?” Zidane appeared confused. “Of course, there’s no one but us here…”

“I mean literally,” Kuja huffed after giving in to a long breath like the madness and anger were spreading in his mind. “There’s no soul to claim in

the Invincible anymore. Someone has released them! How can we achieve Trance without these souls?!”

Unsure how he was going to ease his brother’s temper over this, Zidane scratched the back of his head like he wasn’t taking this seriously. To be fair, he was relieved by the aspect that they will no longer need to absorb the souls of the deceased. “Maybe Garland did it…” he said.

“Of course, he did!” Kuja hollered, his fists shaking in fury, even startling his brother. “Only Garland could have done this! Who else on Terra can even think of doing this? Does he even know our plan? We never told him anything about this!”

It was during Kuja’s tantrum that another sound of unfamiliar footsteps resounded behind them. This prompted the silver-haired Genome to appease down. Both brothers turned around to face what had produced the step sounds. As long as it wasn’t Garland himself…

No, rather, it was a tailed young girl adorned with blond hair.

“A… A Genome…” Kuja revealed, shocked to see how she appeared so similar and yet different from his younger brother who did not realize how

alike she looked like him. Unlike Zidane, Kuja remembered well the same appearance of all the Genomes and how Zidane had been created with the same genetic setup as the rest of them.

But Zidane seemed to have mostly forgotten about them as they had not been very memorable to him, being soulless and everything. He had not actually expected to meet one of these other Genomes on their way to Terra today.

Yet, he knew she was different from all the others he had yet to meet again.

This young teen girl appeared to be provided with a big magic potential. Certainly, it was not as great as Kuja's own spiritual powers, but this was enough for her to best most of the Gaians Zidane had ever met in his life.

Or, what if all Genomes were granted with a magic potential? If that was the case, then why couldn't Zidane cast any stronger magic?

Still, finding another of their kin standing right before them other than Kuja had himself excited. Zidane scrutinized her like she was a wonder to look at, trying to study the shape of her face, the semi-

long blond hair, that slow moving furred tail and these bright aquamarine eyes, all just like his own.

However, there was a peculiar detail over this Genome that caught Kuja's attention, and when he realized why, he frowned.

She was not like the others. That intense, yet soft gaze, these lips holding onto that neutral position to avoid a weak smile, these custom ponytails with nicely decorated pink ties on the side of her head… All of these were the signs of one who took care of themselves, like someone with a soul.

Just like Kuja and Zidane.

"Who are you?" Zidane asked the mysterious Genome girl, oblivious to Kuja's worries over the girl.

Yet, the girl did not provide any response. She maintained her gaze at them, mute like a statue. Her silence propelled Zidane to grow weary of her.

"Are you one of the soulless Genomes, one of Garland's underlings?" he carried on with his questions, still unaware of Kuja's distress.

"***Kuja, Zidane, you are back to Terra, at last.***"

That message in their connected minds had triggered the biggest shock of their recent life. Regressed by the instincts, Zidane launched straight to Kuja, causing both siblings to fall together on the ground in a false move. The girl did not flinch at the brothers' silly move, but for a flash of a second, Kuja swore he had seen a tiny smug on her lips. It did not last long enough to confirm if the smug was aimed at them, like their shenanigans amused her.

The girly voice in their minds clearly indicated the message came from her.

As they stood back on their feet, with his eyes wide in shock, Kuja asked, "You… Did you speak in our connected minds?! How is that possible?"

As he'd do each time when something was irritating him, Zidane unsheathed his daggers and adopted his defensive stance, ready to defend himself, just in case. "Should we kill her?" he requested, enthusiast with the idea to get some more kills right now.

"No, I want answers first…" the elder sibling commented, and Zidane stood back, allowing Kuja to get a closer look at the girl. As Kuja approached her, he saw the glint of life in the corner of her eyes

as she stared at him. “You… Who are you? What is your name?”

Kuja was certain of something about Genomes; they will be provided a name if they possessed a soul. As far as he knew, only Kuja and Zidane ever had that privilege, but if that girl had a name, then this confirmed his theory. And yet, if she possessed a soul like him and Zidane, could she be… an enemy to them too?

Or perhaps an ally? Could Garland have programmed her to be like him and Zidane?

If this girl could speak with them in their minds, then she must have been made special too… However, hearing her in his mind seemed too strange for now that he hoped to get an answer from her own physical voice.

“I am a Genome, one of your kin,” she said with her voice, to Kuja’s relief. However, her tone did not sound as lively as he’d expected from her. “Just like you, I have the privilege of owning a soul. My name is Mikoto.”

The name was the confirmation Kuja needed. Having guessed of this from the start, he didn’t seem as surprised as Zidane. After all, the brothers never

expected to meet another Genome with a soul other than themselves on this dead land. “Wait, Mikoto, so you’re our sister?” the blond young man inquired, almost too casually. Yet, Kuja detected the faint joy in Zidane’s tone for having another family member beyond of what he had ever known through his life.

But to Kuja, that concept of family was limited to his little brother Zidane and no one else. Even being cursed with the awful memory of having thought of Garland as his father once disgusted him beyond hatred, and no one else, especially not another one under Garland’s influence, will be his family.

Adopting his mocking stance, he started to laugh at the absurdity of this scene. “Ha, ha, ha, ridiculous!” he sang out, his face up and his eyes covered by his hand. When he ended his laugh, he returned his sight at their Genome ‘sister’ Mikoto and cooed, “Well… If you truly have a soul, you do not look very expressive. Are you truly one of your own, or are you another one of Master Garland’s pet plays?”

Retaining her impassive expression and her calm, Mikoto responded, “Kuja, Master Garland requests your presence in Pandemonium.”

The excitement and teasing mode vanished fast from Kuja when the name of the despicable old man came from the girl's mouth. If Garland had requested Kuja to meet him somewhere, then that Terran android must know of his angels' presence here! The idea of him knowing this brought a rushing shiver running across his skin. This even got him mad. "What?!" he exclaimed, disdained and disgusted by the idea of meeting Garland in person again. As if his voice in their minds wasn't enough… "What is this farce? The old man knows we're here? What does he want from me?"

Another session of silence greeted him. This time, it was Zidane's turn to lose it. Taking a step ahead, he hissed, "Just answer him, dammit!"

Provided by another silence, the patience was leaving the younger brother. Realizing Mikoto was not going to offer them a proper answer, Zidane was about to launch at her but he was stopped by Kuja. When the blonde turned to him, he spotted the doubt and worry over his older brother's expression. "Zidane…" Kuja called him, keeping his tone low. "Normal Genomes will give you a straight answer. Genomes with a soul like us might not. This girl, Mikoto, truly has a soul, I can feel it. This means… she might trick us."

“Then let’s just kill her already!” Zidane objected and tossed his brother’s arm blocking his way, ignoring his warnings. With a clean bounce, he hurled at her.

On his way to slit her throat, like time had slowed down during his jump, there was something upsetting him to the point he sensed a distress rushing. Even as she gazed upon the blonde boy, there still was no fear over her passive face. The shock did not last when his body banged itself onto something hard like he had hit an indestructible, invisible window. Zidane fell down to his rear with an awful headache, wincing in dizziness and pain.

A magical window had been erected between him and the girl.

Concerned, Kuja rushed to him and grabbed his shoulders. Seeing no injuries over him but the remnants of shock, he cast a light Cure spell. After shaking away the wave of shock and worry, the brothers darted their eyes to where Mikoto, who remained unfazed, stood.

Behind her back, something, or rather, someone far more threatening stood tall and proud, a presence which halted the brothers into complete surprise and fear. The dark and grand form that made it up

darkened the room with all but that bright, red light illuminating the shadow's self, showing up the immensity of the spiritual power that it possessed.

From the depth of his memories, a name came to Zidane.

"G-Garland…" he stuttered, like the old man's presence awakened his past life. This was so odd, though. Zidane did not remember much of his creator's appearance, but his instincts indicated that this bearded old man in a black mechanical body was their Master.

Thus, images of his past started to flood in the back of his mind.

A soulless village, bathed in blue. Some random teleportation pods. A sad Kuja. A scared Kuja. A mean, big old man, strangling Kuja.

Blood.

Something in his memories told him this mean old man must be disposed of.

Without even reflecting how dangerous this android must be, Zidane snarled at him and launched from his stance, his daggers ready to cut through him. He heard Kuja behind who begged him to stop

this dumb move, but Zidane could only think of bringing death to their creator who had brought them life and yet so much pain. Death was all he deserved for torturing him and his brother!

Before he even reached him, Zidane was tossed out of Garland's way with a mere sweep of a robotic hand with a violent, painful strike. The blond was propelled meters away and was dropped down in a brutal landing, leaving him dizzier and wounded on the ground. As he shook his head in confusion and unable to make out what was happening ahead of him from his blurred vision, he could see Kuja's silhouette trying to use magic against their master. The attempt was all in vain when not a sparkle came out of his hands. Soon, Kuja's silhouette was joined by another dark silhouette, with the white form hung above the black one. The white screamed and struggled to get free from what looked like a strangulation move from the black one.

Garland was holding Kuja to his neck with a bare hand. And suddenly, another clear image from the past raced before his eyes.

The same horrifying strangulation shot from his past childish eyes. The same thing had happened, long, long years ago.

“Kuja! Kujaaa!” Zidane suddenly found himself screaming and crying like a child as if his brother’s name was the only word he knew.

Swept by panic despite seeing his reality in a blur, Zidane tried getting on his two feet until he sensed an abrupt pain in the back of the neck. At the same time, his consciousness left him.

“***You will no longer need to follow him.***”

“***Ugh… what?***”

“***I am taking his soul back. He will become an empty vessel like the others because he has become useless.***”

“***Huh?***”

“***Are you that oblivious? Did I create you to be stupid? I assume this is the result of sixteen years growing under a failed prototype. Open your eyes and see for yourself.***”

“***Don’t…***” “D-Don’t talk about Kuja like that…”

The voice in his mind came to torture him like a strangling whisper. It pained him enough to stir him

away from the slumber which he had been inflicted with. With a pain to the neck, Zidane began to massage it before he was surprised by the pose he'd awaken to. He realized he had been left on the cold ground for some time. When he sat back on his rear and allowed his eyes to focus on his environment, he discovered himself in a wide organic-looking red and dark room with steam exiting some flesh pipes in appearance. To his side, a throne in the image of death itself that seemed to be made of metallic bones stood.

On the throne, Kuja lied still, his body lumping heavy and his eyes weighty and lifeless.

I am taking his soul back. He remembered Garland telling these very words in his minds.

"Kuja!" Zidane called him out in complete panic as he threw himself to his weakening brother who had hardly reacted to his call, if not at all. He shook him by the shoulders, expecting Kuja to make a move, to say something, but the elder sibling remained mute and completely still. Scared to have lost him, Zidane came to grab the sides of his head and pulled his face closer to Kuja's, trying to force his brother's barely open eyes to gaze at him. "Kuja,

p-please look at me! You're okay, a-alright?! It's all going to be okay!"

Refusing to let his hope vanish, Zidane continued to shake and speak to Kuja, hoping for a reaction or an answer. He'd been trying to hold onto this hope, but unfortunately, the tears had already begun to blur his vision. The idea of losing his guardian forever to something as dumb as getting his soul stolen should have never come now! Kuja will not become an empty vessel! He was stronger than that! What will Zidane do with a shell? They were nothing but simple things…

Then, more clear images flashed at him.

A décor of red. Shattered glasses on the ground. A panicked Garland. A slumbering Kuja among the shattered glasses. Then darkness.

Was this place… Pandemonium, the place where Garland had wanted to meet Kuja?

Had Zidane ever been here before? Was this why he had suddenly experienced this déjà-vu sensation?

Overwhelmed by all these strange pictures in his mind, Zidane shook his head, attempting to get them away. The least he wished right now was to show any potential, emotional weakness in enemy's

territory. He had to stay strong for Kuja, or he will lose him forever! Zidane was the only one who could save him now!

He took his focus back to his older brother. Kuja appeared too lethargic to move by himself or manifest any kind of reaction to his environment. Trying to tame his cries, Zidane rubbed his eyes to toss these tears away and he continued to hush comforting words as if Kuja could hear him. As a last resort, as he recalled all these great times together when they were younger, Zidane went even closer to him, his nose suddenly poking Kuja's nose with an affectional touch. When Zidane was young, this friendly cuddle would always eased his nerves, and he wished this will somehow trigger a reaction from Kuja.

Kuja, an empty vessel meeting a fate worse than death itself.

Seeing nothing out of it, Zidane whined as he released the tears.

Yet, his patience paid off.

The blank eyes of Kuja began to be filled with some life and light again. The elder sibling started to move each of his limbs by himself and then it went

up to his throat, producing some groans and growls from having his slumber stolen away. Thrilled with relief and joy to see Kuja reacting to him once again, Zidane couldn't help but throw a warm hug at him, never stopping his bawls and cries of joy. "Kuja!" he exclaimed, feeling the burden of his emotions leaving him, at last.

Confused, Kuja blinked at him at a slow pace. He could not seem to focus with his eyes but he could hear his brother's voice clear and sharp. "Z-Zidane?" His voice came out like a fog.

"Kuja, don't speak, okay?" Zidane begged him, afraid to see Kuja losing more of his soul if speaking was causing him to lose his strength. He hugged Kuja tighter than before and pulled him away from this cursed throne, keeping him in his arms. "***Let's use our connected minds, okay? That'll use up less of your physical efforts!***"

Yet, to the silver-haired young man, thinking with his mind seemed like a heavy struggle as if he had been drained of his life and he was only slowly gaining it back. In complete silence, Kuja allowed himself to be pulled by his little brother. In slow, steady steps, Zidane began to help Kuja move out of this strange throne room. When Kuja's vision finally

sharpened and allowed him to discover his environment, a sudden shiver rushed through his body, causing the hairs on his tail to tense. "***T-This is Pandemonium…***" Kuja stuttered in his telepathic link, his panic audible.

"***Yeah,***" Zidane replied as he still struggled to pull his brother toward the exit of this dreaded area. "***Garland… I think he tried to get your soul and leave us here… He wants you gone, Kuja… He really wants to… We… We shouldn't have come here…***"

Despite the doom looming over him in this hell, Kuja huffed a weak laugh. "***But we had to come here, if we want to get rid of Garland… Or else… else… things will go worse… Y-You could've…***"

Zidane's eyes shot wide open. "***What? What about me?***" he asked in confusion.

Kuja realized the slip of the tongue. It was his own selfish desire to never let Zidane know this and Kuja was still not ready to tell him the truth about Garland's control over him with the Invincible. But whatever the elder was thinking, Zidane wasn't going to let him worry. The younger man tossed these worries out by giving Kuja the warmest of smiles to indicate that everything was going to be

alright. Thanks to Zidane's reassurance, Kuja was able to gain more confidence and vigor as they left the accursed throne room as if that throne was a magic artefact sapping their lives.

Still, Kuja felt too weakened to walk by himself as he continued to let himself carried away by his brother.

"***D-Don't worry,***" Zidane kept on saying, holding and walking with the exhausted Kuja in his arms. "***You're not alone. Don't take the burden all for yourself. We'll do this together, and we'll be free. Garland will be dead and you'll rule the worlds, both worlds…***"

Not… alone… This was a nice thought, a splendid symphony to his ears. However, there was something Kuja had just grasped, now that Zidane had made mention of it once again.

And suddenly, ruling the worlds didn't sound as satisfying as Kuja had envisaged since his whole life. The idea of ruling was a mere joke, an ambition only set to mock Garland's goals. After having been so close to lose his soul and his life, the aspect of ruling was no longer a desire he aspired for.

Right now, being not alone was all he needed. Zidane was right. Kuja was not alone in this. He had never been alone to begin with, ever since that brat came to exist. Zidane was all Kuja had ever needed in his life…

And Kuja's safety was all that mattered to Zidane. To the elder brother, however, this was the opposite. Kuja had become Zidane's burden now.

What an older brother he was, but for the younger's sake, Kuja had to live through this…

Finally, as they made their way to the exit of the next room, Kuja regained enough strength to allow himself to walk again, saving Zidane of a heavier burden. Thanks to Zidane's efforts to save him, soon Kuja was able to speak with his lips again, though his body felt wobbled. With a more uplifted Zidane after regaining his brother back, he felt more energetic than ever to explore this Pandemonium place like he was going on adventures, fighting their way to freedom and continuing their path for conquest. Kuja had forgotten the ways out of Pandemonium as he had been to this place only twice in his life before, and one of these two times was when Garland was about to claim his soul back. Walking around this area filled with guardian mobs

and numerous puzzle rooms, all created by their master, was no easy task, but with two energetic Genome brothers fighting together, they will achieve anything.

Like killing their master.

After a long hour of run through this maze that made up Garland's castle, at last, they reached to the exit of this dreaded place, finding the outside bathed in the blue light of Gaia's crystal above their head. Along it, a weaker red light aggressively pranced around the blue light like it was claiming its energy. To their pleasant surprise, the Invincible glided high above. Their objective, all available to them like a generous gift from the gods, appeared to be too easy of access.

But as in every adventure tales, their quest could never be concluded without an obstacle on their way. Right under the Invincible, their master stood, his back at them, not even taking his time to turn around. He was standing alone and staring at the red and blue lights, waiting for his Angels of Death to come. Infuriated by the presence of the despicable old man contemplating the crystals, Zidane snarled at him with his weapons out with Kuja to hold him back to avoid an unfounded battle. Better be

prepared before dealing with this millennium android man.

“The fusion of Terra and Gaia is near,” Garland commented with his usual authoritarian voice. “It is thanks to you, my dear Kuja, for the war and calamity you brought upon Gaia.”

Listening to him calling him “dear” disgusted Kuja beyond loathing, prompting him to a growing rage that was already too great. Kuja was all but dear to that malevolent old man!

“But this war will never fully accomplish the goal I desire on my creators’ stead,” Garland carried as his focus was now drawn onto the younger angel. Zidane’s frown deepened. “I need a being that will surpass my first Angel of Death, the mere prototype. My perfect Angel, Zidane, will be the one who will complete this goal of Terra’s absorption of Gaia. He is the means of destruction needed.”

“Shut up!” Zidane hissed at him. If Kuja wasn’t holding him right now, he would have already proceeded to tear this man apart for having created and used them as mere tools for his foolish goals. “You gave us a soul, and we don’t care about the fusion! Just let us experience our lives!”

“Lives that I can take back anytime,” the old android added, his tone never changing. “Do you truly think owning a soul means I should let you wander around freely like a normal creature born with a soul? How ironic, Zidane, since the way you act, think, speak and move is exactly how I have intended you to become before I had even begun the process of your conception. You are still mine to claim.”

Kuja froze.

All the fears he had been pondering about Zidane’s bratty manners had just been confirmed. Were Zidane’s strange and foolish behaviors and personage all programmed by Garland himself? Or was this all dumb luck over the years? Kuja couldn’t believe all this was coincidence. He knew Garland could not lie, which meant…

Had Zidane been the biggest victim here? Had he been manipulated by both Garland and Kuja himself his whole life? All this was no coincidence…

Their fates, they were all written by Garland from the start…

Did Garland write Zidane and Kuja’s hatred toward him? Was this part of his plan too?

Furious at their creators, the brothers were ready to attack him, with Zidane holding onto his daggers and with Kuja gathering his magical powers to blast the man to oblivion with a powerful Flare.

A roar froze them, however. A roar that was all too familiar.

A Silver Dragon descended from the sky and landed on the ground to block the brothers from reaching Garland. Stunned by the odd position the dragon was adopting after the landing, Zidane was the first to recognize their dragon companion. “Mahila…?” the boy called their Silver Dragon hesitantly, making few shy steps ahead to check on her.

Instead of the cuddling Zidane expected from her, he was welcomed by a rather brutal slap of her tail which sent him propelling in the air until he was stopped on the hard ground, close to Kuja’s feet. Panicking, Kuja rushed to the young brother and caught him by the shoulders before casting a Cure spell to lift him from wounds inflicted by the landing. Still hurt to the bones, Zidane weakly kneeled himself, holding onto his bleeding nose with his hand before looking back at their Silver Dragon with distraught eyes.

“Mahila?! What has gotten you?!” the boy called her, his voice expressing terror for their lifetime companion that might now be lost forever.

From behind, Kuja put his palms over Zidane’s shoulder, giving him an apologetic shake of the head. “Mahila… is being controlled by Garland,” Kuja hushed to him. From that moment, Kuja could see the tiny tears wanting to escape from Zidane’s orbits over the loss of their friend. “As their creator, Garland can also hold absolute control over any Silver Dragons.”

“You’ve learned your lessons well, Kuja,” Garland commented with a hint of pride in his tone. “Not too bad for a failed prototype.”

“Would you stop calling him a failure?!” Zidane snarled, unable to get over the sorrow over losing their dragon. “Kuja had accomplished more than you’d ever think!”

Not troubled by his creations’ reactions, the man shook his head and said, “Zidane, you are only seeing the outer layer of things. You are thinking too simple to see under the deeper layers.”

Unable to contain himself, the younger Genome fought to get away from his brother’s arms before

launching himself toward the old man to kill him, only to get shoved by the now stranger dragon again. Yet, Zidane refused to give up on her. Mahila was part of his family too, Genome or not! If there was a way to free her from Garland's control, then he'll find it!

"Stop right there!"

Alarmed by the cry, everyone turned to the voice. They were all taken aback by the presence of the Alexandrian Queen's group, led by the Tantalus young human who already had his sword out. After him, the rest of his friends unsheathed their weapons.

Garnet, she was here too…

Zidane couldn't take his focus away from Mahila now… He had to forget about Garnet!

It seemed Garnet and the rest of the Gaians wanted Garland dead as well. They must think he was the root of the calamity upon their home planet.

And they were right. All of them had the same target in mind. If they could work on it together to bring down the malevolent man to his demise… If they could dispose of the man who had started everything…

Yet, the brothers' dreams crumbled fast when Garland ordered Mahila to fight the Gaians, confident she was able to take on them all at once. Unfortunately, the Genome brothers knew her strength and weaknesses.

And they knew she wasn't going to make it.

"No! Mahila!" Zidane screamed, trying to help her. Instead, he bumped into another invisible magical wall which blocked his way to his dragon friend. This was the same invisible field from the Invincible incident! The old man had created this! With another painful bounce on the ground, he quickly got back on his feet with his brother coming to his side to check on him. Together, they helplessly witnessed as their Silver Dragon companion roared at the Gaians, ready to shred them to flesh as dictated by her new master.

With the Gaians out of his way, Garland approached his angels and told them, "You coveted my demise for years. You wished to see my death under your hands, but I will not abandon the goals of my creators. You will complete their goals in my stead."

"We're not going to complete anything for you!" Kuja tried to say out loud, keeping his cool stance

and voice at the same time. “The least you deserve is our servitude and services!”

The old man’s laugh echoed through the surrounding. “You are right, Kuja,” Garland admitted, but he didn’t sound more worried than he should be. “You are not going to complete anything for me, because Zidane will.”

“He told you already he does not care about your goals!” the silver-haired man shouted, and Garland sensed Kuja’s loss of confidence had begun now. Seeing his master filled with determination had gotten over his temper like he felt he was being mocked by his creator, even though Garland might meet his end soon. The old man must think he will win this battle.

Kuja stepped ahead and waited for Zidane to make a move.

Yet, Zidane did not make any move.

Shocked by his little brother’s lack of action, Kuja turned to him. Only now he realized why Garland predicted he will win this battle.

Just like in Alexandria during Bahamut and Alexander’s raid, it no longer was Zidane standing behind him.

Under the Invincible, awaiting his master's orders…

… An empty shell stood.

Author's note*: I know that in-game, Zidane is the only one able to decipher the script things in Ipsen's Castle, and that's how they found their way to Terra and all. However, without any Terran among the group in this story, I had to somehow make it so that the group was able to decipher the Terran scripts. Maybe Doctor Tot was with them and with his great knowledge, he was the one who translated everything? Or maybe everything was already written in Gaian, lol.*

Also, trading Kuja in place of Zidane in the "You're not alone" sequence was kind of weird to write, but the "alone" theme still stands. I guess that works, lol.

Also separating this chapter in two because it was too long.

Chapter 24: Fear

Sorry for the last cliffhanger.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 24: Fear

This was the most unbearable sight, to be helpless while watching Zidane's eyes devoid of any trace of life when they were usually full of lights and emotions. As if his soul had been sapped away from him, the boy lacked the thrill that made his core. He was a real, soulless Genome, and unlike the rest of his brethren, this one possessed the potential to murder any kind of foes without hesitation, now that mercy and rationality were taken out of him. It was his master's intention from the start, to wait for his perfect creation to come here, to Terra, to control him with the Invincible.

Was Zidane lost forever on Kuja too? Will Garland make him fight the Gaian to his loss as well?

No… Zidane was too precious to Garland and losing him before the fusion occurred meant

complete defeat for him.

“Master Garland…” Kuja called the old man, his voice strained with a rising anger but also a small fear. “I knew you were the most despicable man in this world and without an ounce of care for your creations, but I did not know you would stoop so low as to take control of Mahila and Zidane…!”

“***Zidane… If you can hear me, please say something…***” he reverted to their connected minds in private with the hope to hear from his younger brother, to see if his soul was somewhere deep within this empty husk. Perhaps he was still in there…

“***Zidane hears you, but he will no longer listen to you,***” Garland revealed, using their telepathic power. “***I am using the Invincible to force him with my orders and he will only comply with me.***”

This comment from Garland had put Kuja into a sad shock, revealing that he’d been played by the old man for his entire life. He realized Garland was still able to catch their private conversations and it probably was why it had been so easy for him to know of their plans to overthrow him. Had the man listened to their private messages for all the past twelve years since they had been given this

communication ability? Was this how the damn old geezer knew exactly where to find them and when they were coming to Terra?

That damn Garland! He had planned this from the start! He had implemented this inside them to monitor them closer than he had ever imagined, even from distance! How had Kuja never seen this coming? He should have realized it the day the old man had proposed this ability to them!

That wicked old man, he had been right all along.

Kuja failed to see through this ruse just as a failed prototype would.

Shame waving all over him for having failed to see this obvious plan, all Kuja wished now was to crawl away in a hole and rot away. The failure to prevent all this, to save their dragon and Zidane from Garland's control, ashamed him so much he'd welcome death now if he could.

Yet, there was hope. He knew there was one way to save them.

The only way was to eliminate this man, but right now, this was an impossible task with Zidane standing on his way between him and his mortal enemy. If he had to fight Garland, Kuja will have to

fight the one he had watched growing for sixteen years from a tiny, innocent infant to a full-grown young man. Standing like an undead, Zidane's glassy glare was drawn to Kuja, his master's enemy, showing no remorse, guilt nor emotion, haunting his guardian. It pained the elder so much he couldn't think rationally through a solution to this.

Without hearing any command from his master, the boy dragged his daggers out of his sheaths and propelled himself at his foe, his former caregiver, to finish him without saying a word. Speaking was useless for a compliant vessel and this will only slow him down. After all, Garland knew Zidane had to be fast if he wanted Kuja to disappear.

Fighting his little brother was inevitable. Yet, hurting Zidane was out of the question for Kuja.

"Zidane, please stop!" Kuja struggled to shout as he avoided the first dagger slash from his brother's blade. It shocked the elder when he realized there had been no hesitation between the first slash and the second, though, thankfully, he was able to duck both blows. Unfortunately, Kuja wasn't as athletic and fast as Zidane. When it was time for the third slash, it hit his left arm, barely, but enough to pack some pain and see the blood flow staining his sleeve.

Wincing in pain, Kuja immediately casted a Cure on himself, closing the wound and relieving him of the discomfort.

However, his heart sank. He couldn't stand here helpless as his little brother was still trying to slay him.

This was it. He had no choice. Using the same plan he had come up with during that incident in Alexandria where Zidane had been assaulting him, Kuja pushed out his most powerful Sleep spell. Strangely, the wave of lights that made up the show of this spell seemed to wave past the boy like the light was avoiding him. The Sleep fell into nothingness and Zidane clearly was nowhere affected by the magic. This was when Kuja discovered a faint barrier glowing around him, a protective field surrounding the boy. It must be Garland's magic that was protecting Zidane from all bad ailment spells.

No, he'll have to hurt him…

Kuja!

The young voice of the child that loved him deeply resounded in his mind like a creeping nightmare haunting his present. That name… It was

the only word the young child was able to utter back in the days, where Zidane would smile whenever Kuja was there for him. The clear moving image of the running and grinning blond kid flashed like he was the most overjoyed one for having found his big brother, his guardian. Zidane didn't know what a failure was. He had no concept of what was good and what was bad. He only had love for his sibling.

Such a loving and warm image shattered as soon as Kuja ignited a mighty Flare magic attack, the powerful spell blasting through its intended target.

Kuja had just injured his little brother.

Landing and rolling to the ground with burnt and smokes trailing behind him after being propelled to the air by the attack, Zidane stayed on the ground for a moment. The attack left him weaker and injured, but as an empty vessel made to comply with his master's orders, he struggled to get back on his feet without questioning Garland's choices. By watching Zidane in pain and frail while the boy only had a care to execute his master's goals, Kuja felt his heart ached with guilt, the guilt of his own spell hurting his sibling. Zidane feebly got on his knees before he caught his daggers that had fallen. Soon, he was back on his legs, his blank stance unchanged.

Despite that blast that was enough to pack some punch and cause his body to shake, Zidane was still compliant with Master Garland and ready to kill his brother for the old man's sake.

"Master Garland, just stop it!" Kuja begged, his voice losing his cool now. Yet, his creator continued to keep an eye over his angels' battle, not concerned by Kuja's call.

Zidane increased his efforts to bring more deadly slashes at his older brother, each swings and stabs of his daggers intended on killing his master's nemesis for good. This time, Kuja could not gather his will to hurt his younger brother furthermore, dreading of inflicting him enough damage to render him in a comatose state, or worse, killing him. Instead, Kuja tried avoiding the attacks the best he could, with each passing second bringing him closer to the weariness of his body and mind, both untrained to sustain such efforts.

When Kuja's breaths were exhausted from his lungs, when he hopelessly observed as his little brother jumped high above with his blades ready to stab him to death…

… Zidane suddenly stopped.

He lost grip of his daggers that landed on the ground in booming clangs. The boy stood there, all silent and frozen, before his orbits rolled out and his lids closed with his body now falling at Kuja's feet.

Zidane was slumbering, or rather, was knocked unconscious.

A miracle… But how did this happen? Kuja had not done anything to inflict unconsciousness over him!

As Kuja's heart skipped more than a few beats, he darted his stare away from his brother to look up instead. There, just behind where Zidane used to stand, he saw her, the one his brother had called a *sister*, Mikoto.

She had knocked Zidane out in a flash. She had saved her *brother*.

"***I just… could not bear to see you helpless,***" Mikoto shared in their connected minds. Hearing her in his mind still startled him as he had been so used to only hear Zidane speak to him for more than half of his life. In spite of her near expressionless face, Kuja detected the faint light of thrill in her eyes. Was this her way to exhibit her emotions?

She must have experienced her life around expressionless vessels, which must be why she was struggling to manifest emotions just as Kuja had been before his trips to Gaia…

Unable to express his joy over seeing Zidane saved by a third party, Kuja crumbled to his knees and stared at the unconscious body. Watching the boy at peace reminded him so much of the young child of his past who would sleep between his arms because this was the only place where the tiny boy found slumber and good dreams. Kuja's hands and tail were shivering with an odd euphoria with a thrilling rush of happiness filling his mind like he could sense the child in his arms again.

But this was not the time to wrap his brother between his arms. There was something else of far greater importance right now. Perhaps it was the moment he'd been waiting for, to see if all his trainings for magic had paid off over the years.

However…

"Mikoto, I am truly disappointed," Garland rose his voice, taking few steady steps toward her as his shadow was now cast over her. A certain rising fear was now perceptible on her face. "Just because I have given you a soul and a great potential in magic,

agility and raw strength does not mean you have to stand against my will. By knocking your sibling Zidane down, you have become a traitor to Terra. It is such a shame. While I did not conceive Kuja to be controllable with the special frequencies of the Invincible, just like Zidane, I can have control over you, don’t you forget. Now, I will have to use this control to order you, my third Angel of Death, to get rid of Kuja.”

Third Angel of Death? Was she meant to replace both him and Zidane?

Yet, no matter, the fear was intensifying over the young Genome girl, everyone could see it now. Her empty vessel personage was shattered and she began to shiver.

She must have as much of a soul as Zidane.

“No!” Mikoto screamed, crawling under her master’s shadow as she covered herself with her arms and tail as if they will protect her from the Invincible’s frequencies.

But an echoing roar interrupted them.

Kuja grew more worried. That all familiar roar which he recognized as a Silver Dragon’s cry came from the one they called their beloved companion.

From afar, where the battle had been engaged by the Gaians, an injured Mahila, painted in crimson red, shrieked and groaned from all the inflicted wounds from this senseless fight. Standing on her two back legs, the injuries left her in a strange seizure where her body twitched and twisted in pain. Her wings spread, she dropped to the ground, her life gone from her self. In a flash, her body stopped before it shattered to the gust into particles of dusts. Before her disappearing silhouette, Queen Garnet, Blank and their friends stood victorious over the Silver Dragon's defeat.

Another part of Kuja's self had been stripped away from him, for good…

"M… Mahila…" he whispered, watching as the last of his dragon friend left the world, his brow narrowing in sadness and guilt. If they hadn't come here with her, she would have survived this ordeal…

Yet, Kuja was left with no time to grieve or do anything to remedy this. After defeating their dragon, the Gaians raced to the old android man Garland before he was given the possibility to take control of his third Angel, much to Mikoto's relief. Blank was the first to try taking on the old man before he got the taste of a sweep of his metallic

hand. After a painful landing to the ground, Blank got back on his feet, now more careful with his next attacks.

Garland might have millenniums of experience following his life, but he was faced with eight powerful Gaian's warriors, with two of them having the legendary Eidolons by their sides, the creatures his Master feared. Eight fearless fighters, combined with their years of hardship and experience, will be enough to overthrow the old man from his empty Terran throne. And by adding one destructive, Terran Angel of Death to fight him, Kuja would gladly lend these puny, yet daring Gaians a hand, all to dispose of the root of their sufferings.

At last, the five-thousands-year-old man will fall to his demise.

Unfortunately, nothing will change the sad fact that Kuja was still one of Garland's creations. While his creator could not take control of him, he could, nevertheless, incapacitate him into doing anything. In the blink of an eye, Garland casted a spell on the silver-haired angel, a spell with a heavy effect on him. Dizzy and exhausted, Kuja dropped on his knees besides his brother's unconscious body. As the magic waved through him, Kuja wrestled the effect

of the slumber coming. His palms struggling to hold him into his trembling four-legged position, he attempted to get a good look at the Gaians as they engaged the battle against Garland together.

When he saw the worry on Garland's face, a first in his lifetime, Kuja began to smile.

Eyes returning to the sleeping Zidane, Kuja ought to not worry about Garland anymore. After all, the old man was in quite good hands with the Gaians.

He let his lids down.

…

Something forced his eyes to shoot wide open.

When Kuja came back to consciousness, he wasn't sure how long he was left slumping on the ground, but seeing how Zidane was still limp with eyes shut, his sleeping period must have certainly been short. The Sleep magic that was casted on him seemed to be gone and he heard an agonizing moan somewhere, a moan that had sounded old and familiar. Only one individual on Terra possessed that voice.

Garland.

When the old man’s consciousness left him, a burden had been lifted from Kuja. With a relieved sigh, he turned his attention back at the Gaians where he witnessed what he thought to be the most marvelous play of his life. At the feet of the Gaians, a defeated Garland lied on the ground lifeless and at the complete mercy of his foes. Five thousand years of life defeated by the gathering of many young decades of sufferings… It was all it took to finish that man’s reign.

How delightful!

Thanks to Garland’s defeat, the Sleep curse was now gone from Kuja.

With Garland out of the way, the Gaians could now focus on the escapees they had been trying to catch for some time. Their eyes were now set on Kuja and the sleeping Zidane. This was the dreaded moment Kuja knew would happen eventually, except he had not expected to be alone in this inevitable battle. With an incapacitated Zidane and their Genome sister Mikoto who was standing to the side, improbable to help neither of the group, Kuja realized he will have to deal with the Gaians by himself. But unlike Zidane, Kuja could not see through people’s spiritual powers. If Garland could

not have taken care of the Gaian's combined strength, will Kuja even be able to see through the end of the day alive?

Eight against one was hardly a fair fight. However, with the possible thousands of death tolls under Kuja's mastermind plan with wars and genocides, what exactly was the definition of fairness to him? The young man could not stop himself from smiling at the thought.

It appeared the Gaian group was already prepared to fight him. The physical fighters came to him one by one, trying to stab and slash through him. Using his barrier spells to protect from deeper wounds, he was hit here and there few times, but thanks to his Curaga magic, he was on feet fast enough to inflict damage over the Gaians. All these past practices with magic in preparation for such events like this one had never been so fruitful he thought he was close to get rid of these Gaians out of his way. No way he was going to let them lay a finger on his slumbering brother now. After seeing that none of his foes were weak against any elemental spells, he went with the non-elemental magic like Flare which inflicted more damages to them.

But along this chaotic mess of a fight, Kuja began to ponder. If only he had enough time to learn and perfect the ultimate magic of Ultima, he could have gotten rid of these insects with a mere strike of the hand. Perhaps by achieving Trance like these Gaians, he would be unbeatable. Curse Garland for fooling his plans…

But during his period of deep thoughts, he hadn't realized that the little Gaian girl, the one called Eiko, had begun to call upon an Eidolon to aid them. It was too late for Kuja to cancel her spell when the call was made. As the surrounding came to darkness and he saw nothing but himself, the flashing holy lights and a great lion-like creature appeared ahead of him, ready to inflict its gigantic holy magic attack at him.

Kuja froze.

That lion was the tiny Moogle that had transcended into a permanent state of Trance, achieving its true form as an Eidolon.

From now on, Kuja grasped at his upcoming demise. He was going to be defeated.

That sheer, sad experience of feeling like a failure, of being repeatedly told that he was a failure,

came to haunt him again. All these years of training his magic, all these times planning a genocide in the city of the legendary Summoners, of planning a war that had killed thousands and perhaps millions… All these achievements to get close to the most politically powerful leaders of the planet… For all these years of planning his freedom, for having raised the second Angel of Death to think like him, to follow him, to be loyal to him and… to love him… To train that angel for these years to hate everyone but him and their now gone dragon…

All these things to show that Master Garland had been wrong about him…

All his twenty-four years of efforts were for naught. It all crumbled to dust before his eyes thanks to these simple, puny Gaians.

Kuja shut his eyes. All he could think of right now was…

"***Zidane, I'm so sorry.***"

…

Something caught him and brought him away.

When he opened his eyes, the Eidolon was gone, but he could hear the Gaians' presence behind him.

In his current pose, it was impossible for Kuja to turn around. However, he was able to look up to see the strangest thing in his recent times.

The one holding him was that Genome girl, Mikoto.

Such strength coming from a girl of petite stature…

Keeping one brother under each arm, Mikoto dashed through the air, her agility matching Zidane's when she leaped from pillar to pillar until she reached the closer highest one. Even the weight of the two men didn't seem to deter her strength from weakening. Confused by the girl's action, Kuja remained frozen under her arm. Did she do this to help them? How could she even think of helping them when she barely knew her brothers? Why was she doing this?

Nevertheless, the Gaians were clearly infuriated by Mikoto's savior complex of saving the two Angels of Death. As she put them on the platform over the safest pillar, they could hear a scream from below. "Mikoto!" Blank cried at the girl, but Mikoto did not react at him. So, the Gaians knew her name. They must have met her back in Bran Bal or

something. “These two men are the root of Gaia’s demise! Why are you even saving them?!”

“I have been monitoring and listening to them for my entire short life in silence,” Mikoto said, her voice almost hollow but there was relief in her tone. She must mean their connected minds as Kuja had already forgotten that she could also speak to them with it. “You might see them as the harbingers of war, but they taught me the meaning of friendship and family. We were created by the same man and with the same purpose. They are my brothers and nothing will change that. I need no reason to save anyone from death.”

While the speech sounded cheesy, it reached Kuja directly to the heart.

“They taught me… no, us, Genomes, that even without a free purpose of our own, we can be made to experience the joy of life with no personal goal in mind. They taught us that we can overcome the limits implemented by our creator. Even if the rest of our kin was created without a soul, we can still be filled with experiences and memories. This will make and develop us as individuals. They have given our race hope.”

Outraged, Blank seemed nowhere close to agree with her. He argued out loud, “Maybe they have a good side or something, but this doesn’t change the fact that they have willingly killed many innocents for their own agenda!”

Mikoto swallowed. There were some small tears of guilt in her eyes but she was too far for the Gaians to see them. Only Kuja witnessed her crying. “I’m… sorry…” she said while trying to tone down her sadness.

It must be hard to be shoved between this strange conflict where both sides were her allies. And speaking of which…

Kuja lost his focus on the Gaians. A far more pressing matter caught his concern when something further away was moving.

Garland was stirring out of his unconsciousness.

Without hesitating, Kuja stood ahead, even tossing his sister out of the way. He drew up his hand, directing it toward the awakening old man and he casted his most powerful Flare attack. The flames from his palm rushed across the Gaians, surprising the group that avoided the blow, to hit Garland directly. With a scream, Garland was sent flying

toward the border of the platform before he rolled down on the ground. Unable to stop himself from rolling farther, the old man fell from the cliff, descending straight to the unknown of the abyss. His screams echoed through Pandemonium until they became a figment of the past, where his voice disappeared, forever.

At last…! Garland was gone!

For once, Kuja was able to explain that cathartic shiver running down his spine, from his head to his toes and tail, which prompted an unstoppable grin to form on his face. This was the joy he had been coveting for his entire twenty-four years of life to achieve his freedom, a true one where he will no longer be monitored on endless time, where he will no longer be reminded of his status as Terra's pawn…

And where Zidane will never be controlled by that man, ever again.

Speaking of the little devil, his brother began to moan and groan from his slow and rude awakening. Kuja rushed to him to check his state, to see if everything was all good on him. He turned Zidane around to see if there were any injuries, but thankfully, the boy appeared cleaner than envisaged,

despite having few blood stains here and there. When he drew his focus back at his sister, Mikoto was already gone, leaving them in their brotherly privacy. Where she had gone now didn't matter. He just needed to see Zidane in good shape.

But unlike Kuja, when Zidane slowly opened his eyes, the boy did not smile back. The look in his eyes was of distress, guilt and sadness.

"K-Kuja…" he whispered, dreading to look back at his older brother and he remained aloof, lying to the side and refusing to get back on his feet.

"Zidane, you're okay now," Kuja hushed to him, his slender fingers brushing against his little brother's cheeks.

It alarmed Kuja that Zidane did not feel the same relief. This was unusual, especially when he seemed to be seeking comfort. "Kuja…" Zidane whispered again, with the fear audible in his weak call. "I… I saw everything… I saw all when… Garland… controlled me…"

As if the world twirled and twisted around and turned into hell, life crumbled before him. The last thing he wanted was Zidane to know about this, but it seemed there was no need to hide it anymore.

“I… saw myself… trying to kill you… But for some reason, I-I couldn’t feel anything… as if Garland… removed my individuality… I was… a murdering empty husk…”

Worried of Zidane’s distress, Kuja attempted to hush softer words. “But it’s okay now.”

“No, Kuja…” Zidane’s squinted his eyes like he was trying to release the tears coming out. “This was such a nightmare… You… You could have died because… of me…”

“It’s not your fau—”

“IT IS!”

Zidane’s scream was so sudden Kuja nearly fell off from the shock, though Zidane had gotten away from him with a step backward. When Kuja came back to his initial pose, he saw the rising sorrow and despair on his little brother who was now curled into a fetal position, holding his head between his hands. His body trembled as his eyes cried more tears. “Kuja…” the boy said after calming himself. “Y-You don’t know… what it is… to be an empty vessel… to be all compliant with the man you hate… He wanted you killed, and so… I don’t know

why… I wanted you dead too… His wishes were my wishes… It was so strange…”

As Kuja came closer to him with another brush to the cheek, Zidane stopped his shivers and took the courage to look back at him, like a child coveting his warmth. “I-I know… what happened in Alexandria now… Why I couldn’t remember anything… Garland… he controlled me in Alexandria too, r-right?”

A frown formed on Kuja’s brows, confirming Zidane’s fear.

However, instead of the intensifying crisis Kuja expected, Zidane weakly smiled with a soft chuckle. “This is why you didn’t tell me anything about it, that… it wasn’t my fault… I probably tried… to kill you too…” The boy’s eyes grew wider like they were now filled with some hope. “Kuja, this is why… why we must kill Garland…”

“Garland’s gone now,” the older brother found his time to say, keeping his gentle tone as he continued his soft strokes on the younger one’s cheek. “You don’t have to worry about anything anymore. We killed him. He will never bother us and control you ever again. We’re freed from him. He’s dead.”

The revelation suddenly brought back the young Genome some will and energy. “G-Garland’s dead…? For real?” Zidane asked, doubting his brother’s words.

When Zidane heard the familiar chuckle from Kuja, he bounced from his lying pose to sit. That reassuring chuckle was all he needed to believe in these words. “Why would I lie to you?” Kuja inquired, amused by Zidane’s goofiness. “We’ve come here for this, and it happened, simple as that.”

The real, wide smile on the young man came back, now more restless as if nothing about Garland’s control ever happened. If Garland was dead, then there was nothing to worry about anymore. He began to bounce around like a happy little child, his tail even waging left and right with contentment. Water of joy spread on his face from his eyes shining with his broad, bright blue-green pupils. “We’ve done it! We’ve done it for real! We’re freed from him forever!”

Like a yapping dog launching from the ground, Zidane jumped on Kuja to give him the longest hug they ever had in recent times. His warming tears flowed down his cheeks and Kuja let his shoulders welcome his brother’s head. As the boy laughed of

relief and joy, for once, Kuja did not mind getting his cloths soaked with the joyful torrent of tears from his little brother.

It was a heavy burden off their shoulders. They could breathe the fresh air of freedom for once in their lives.

Yet, there was something missing around. Drawing himself away from his sibling, Zidane stared at Kuja with a now concerned stare. “Wait a second,” he exclaimed, looking around. “Where’s Mahila?”

Whenever their lives had become all pink and flowers, everything withered down to dust by a simple comment in a matter of a second. His smile now gone, Kuja gave a long gaze at Zidane who blinked at him in confusion, but that sad and guilty gaze told him everything he must know. The boy lowered his stare, and this time, his tears had gotten colder and saltier.

“***Kuja.***”

The brothers froze at the call. Their victory already short-lived with the revelation of their dragon companion’s death, they realized that

telepathic call came from neither of them nor that Genome girl which they called their sister.

No, that could not be… him… right?

“M-Master Garland?!” Kuja cried to nowhere in particular, unable to detect where the old man’s voice came from. He turned his head around in confusion, pondering how it was possible for their former master to call them when he had fallen to his ultimate demise. He did not bother using their connected minds to call him as he realized Garland could hear them speak from afar. “How are you still… You’re dead already! Stay dead!”

“***How funny, coming from you. I have never been alive to begin with. I was created by the ancient Terrans as a most willing android with self-awareness. My vessel is now at the bottom of the abysses, completely destroyed, but my will lingers inside my Angels of Death.***”

“Just die already, you old fool!” Kuja screamed, the sweats down on his face shouting his despair and panic. However, Zidane appeared calmer, but he seemed more worried of his brother’s unusual state of mind.

From afar, the Gaians were able to witness the scene, watching Kuja's tantrum and Zidane's calm, unaware of Garland's persisting presence inside the Genome siblings.

Mikoto appeared before the Gaians with a regretful shake to the head and she shut her eyes. "Garland's voice. He is speaking to my brothers but I can hear him too," she explained the situation to them. "He will tell Kuja and Zidane… everything."

Curious but also concerned of her former's friend wellbeing, Queen Garnet approached the Genome girl. "What do you mean by everything?"

The young girl gulped. "I'll… tell you later."

"***Kuja, you have always been a mere prototype, a defect. You are a failure, the inferior Angel of Death.***"

However, these insults seemed to have brought Kuja back the courage to hold onto his narcissist nature to speak against the old man. Tightening his stance, Kuja claimed, "What do words of a dead man mean to me? Shoot away all the inferiority complex insults you wish, but here I am, thriving in this world over your throne while your 'mere' will linger. You are incapable of hurting anything but my

feelings and my pride, which I must admit are completely unaffected by your words!”

“***Pride. This should be an unfamiliar word for a failure. Are you even capable of pride?***”

“Are you claiming that I am inferior to my little brother? How can you be so sure of the fact? Why don’t you ask him what he thinks?”

Getting all the attention now encouraged Zidane to straighten from his spot and hiss at the old man. He exclaimed aloud, “Yeah! Even if I’m superior, it’s not like we care!”

Taken aback by the unexpected response, Kuja decided to let it slip. “Not the answer I have projected, but you catch my drift,” Kuja added before giving away a giggle.

Strange, the comment did not seem to deter Garland away from his convictions. When they heard the calm laugh from the old fool they despised so much, the courage in their heart began to melt away with the fear trying to take over. How could Garland still be so confident after his five thousand years of work had dropped down in the abyss to disappear forever?

“***Should I remind you of that incident, twelve years ago?***”

Kuja froze again. That comment was not expected at all. “W-What? Twelve years ago? What happened?” Kuja’s sudden rising fear caused him to struggle with his own words.

It went worse with the old man’s laugh echoing louder in their minds.

“***Oh, right. Kuja, how can you remember that incident? You were not present to witness it, at least, consciously.***”

A sudden, clear and ephemeral image flashed at Zidane.

An unconscious Kuja, his face full of blood, right before him.

“***Zidane, you were present, physically and consciously. Do you not remember that incident?***”

All of a sudden, Zidane caught his head between his palms as panic and trouble began to creep inside his mind. The struggle to remember such a specific event twelve years ago was starting to be painful to him and he began to manifest a fear he could not

tame. Flashes kept bombarding his mind with scary, bloodied images, but they quickly vanished.

He still could not remember, and yet, he knew that perhaps something had indeed happened back then.

“I-I…” he stuttered.

“***My poor angel. You cannot remember, right? Of course, you do not remember. This was twelve years ago. You were only a very young child, a simple four-year-old Genome with a terrible attention span. You cannot expect individuals to remember much of their young childhood, and you are no exception to this rule. No matter, this is to be expected from my perfect creation.***”

Being praised by this man triggered an amplifying rage building inside him. This was far worse than getting insulted. “Stop calling me perfect! I’m not yours!” Zidane hissed at him with a low growl protruding from his throat.

“***Zidane, your ‘flaws’ are what make you the perfect Genome, because it was twelve years ago, at the premature age of four, that you achieved Trance for the first and only time.***”

…

The silence reigned supreme and longer than it should. Neither of the brothers grasped at the gravity of Garland's words as they were both diving into complete conflicts beneath. Kuja's reassurance vanished like smoke in the air while Zidane could no longer think straight. They did not know what to make out of this revelation.

It was only until Zidane's tail twitched in an involuntary manner that he exclaimed a short, "W-What?!"

Unsurprisingly, Garland did not offer any reply to Zidane's reaction. Alarmed and shocked, Kuja narrowed his brows into confusion before he stuttered to his brother, "H-How? That… can't be true! Do you remember it?! How did it happen? Why can't I remember anything about it?!"

"***Kuja. You, at most, should not understand, because you are imperfect.***"

"Explain this to me, dammit!" Kuja screamed in despair at the old man, very close to tear his hair apart.

"***Of course, Kuja. You cannot remember the incident. As I have mentioned, truth be told, you were unconscious during the entire event.***"

Kuja froze a moment and blinked. “What?”

“***Yes, this was twelve years ago, when you were going through your worst rebellion case. From such grave actions, I had taken the decision to reclaim your soul and make you a soulless Genome. I had beaten you to weaken you until you could no longer cling to consciousness, and Zidane had witnessed it all. Unable to hold onto his feelings like one normal individual with a soul should, the child was invaded by a plethora of strange complex emotions. To watch his dear caregiver and elder brother tortured and stolen away from him triggered a growing fear, worry, sadness and anger, all at the same time.***”

The terrifying images of the past now resurfaced like a clear hologram of his nightmare as if he could revive this painful, young life. It all began to haunt Zidane who couldn’t hold his memories together quite yet. This was so excruciating he could not look at Kuja anymore, afraid he’d face the same horrific incident that was so close to bring him closer to his only true fear.

To be alone.

He saw a flash of Kuja, bathing in blood after having been continuously struck by the strong

metallic hands of their dark master. He recalled Garland screaming furious words at his first angel for having done a bad thing he did not remember. Kuja had been a bad boy for disobeying. Kuja was to be tortured and lose his soul like the other boring Genome siblings.

Yet, Zidane loved Kuja too much. He had refused to lose his cherished brother forever. If Zidane had to die saving him, he would gladly give up his life, which he now remembered doing twelve years ago when he fought Garland at the tender age of four.

"***These complex emotions Zidane developed by growing under your care from an infant until that time were the catalysts needed for him to enter Trance. This had triggered an immense strength to grow out of him and he had used it to save you from turning into an empty shell like all the others.***"

Yet, while still trying to grasp at this reality hitting him like a full blow to the head, Kuja could not believe this to be the truth. However, he knew that Garland had been created by his Terran creators to never lie about known facts to him. Realizing that Zidane had unwillingly ascended Trance just to save him gave him a baffling, yet comforting sensation to

his heart. “Z-Zidane entered Trance… to save me… twelve years ago?” Kuja whispered to himself, his broadened, shocked eyes still shivering. “All this time… I-I… I never knew…”

Nevertheless, Garland ignored whatever crisis the Genome brothers were enduring without a sheer of regrets nor guilt in his voice. “***It had all started back when you had reported to me of the ‘shining horned human’ from Gaia who had become stronger while trying to save his friend, seventeen years ago. This was where I had studied my masters’ archives and learned of the power of Trance, a power even the ancient Terrans possessed. Kuja, you were already a failure to me, back then, but it was having the power of Trance in mind that confirmed the fact.***”

The shiver running across Kuja’s body gained in intensity. “Am I… truly a failure?”

“***You have read about Trance yourself. Deep within you, you knew the truth of the failure you were, but you refused to accept it and disclose it to your little brother. A surge of complex emotions is needed to attain Trance. However, you were created as an adult from the start. You had never experienced a true childhood and this was why you***

had never developed these complex emotions. You will never attain Trance, at least naturally. I knew of your plan to use the imprisoned souls of the Invincible to absorb them and achieve Trance with them, because I could listen to you and Zidane's telepathic conversations, even the private ones. Thanks to this, I have released them."

There was a pregnant pause. Kuja turned to Zidane to see how he was fairing over this. The younger man appeared more serene, but he looked as perturbed and puzzled.

"***This is why I had to create my second Angel of Death as an infant with the capability to grow naturally. This was the only way for a Genome with a soul to develop these complex emotions needed to enter Trance. Just as I had planned, Zidane developed a deep friendship and love with you as his sole guardian and family. His wish to save you even at the risk of his own life granted him the ability to achieve Trance that day, twelve years ago. This was Zidane's true purpose as the perfect Angel of Death.***"

The brothers stared at each other, shivering.

"***Thankfully, back then, even in Trance, Zidane was still no match for me. He still had not fully***

developed his strength potential to its fullest. I was able to stop him from leading me to my premature death. Still, with the confirmation that my experiment was a success, my plan was set from then. I had to leave you alive with your soul so Zidane will continue to grow under you and look up to you as the caring older brother and the only one who could offer him love. I had counted on that for the following years and everything progressed as I had foreseen."

Their entire lives felt so disturbing now, knowing it was all part of a grand scheme by the man they hated so much. Everything they had done, all the plans they had thought, everyone and everything they had cared for… Garland had planned it all. He had been manipulating them for their whole existence without lifting a finger or even touching them. They were so disgusted by themselves, grasping that everything was nothing but the artificial will of that old fool.

Yet, there was something warm beneath. Somehow, thanks to it, they couldn't bring themselves to regret everything they had shared with each other. Even if it was the will of their creator, they could not deny that their brotherly relationship was real. Even if Kuja had somehow manipulated

Zidane, he had always loved him until the end, just as Zidane had always loved and admired his big brother for what he was.

Whatever Garland said about it being his own will, they will remain together.

"***The war and the genocide you brought upon Gaia were a great start, but they need to be completed with a being powerful enough to be able to destroy armies by itself. This is where Zidane enters. By the time he will be of age, he will be developing enough strength and experiences to become invincible when he will achieve Trance again. Ever since he had disposed of one of the most politically powerful men on Gaia, the King of Alexandria, I had begun to plant the seeds of despair into him.***"

Zidane only grasped now why, for all these years, he had been tortured from within, to hear the old man in his mind constantly reminding of his fate as his perfect Angel of Death. The tears of angers and shock were shed on his face. "That's when… you began to speak to me…? Me only?" His voice trembled as he struggled to find the right words.

"***Yes, my angel. My goal was to temper with your emotions enough so you could enter Trance***

again.”

“You damn old man!” Zidane snarled at him, infuriated when he realized that Garland had no guilt to reveal everything. The old man had no care of their anger, their sadness and their wellbeing. All that mattered was his damn goal to restore Terra to its glory. The rage from within was burning so hot the boy was about to tear everything apart.

“***After six years of reminding you of your fate, I have been disappointed that the power of Trance has never manifested within you again. However, there was one time the power was close to hatch in you, right in the Alexandrian castle dungeon when these two pestering jesters were pressuring you to execute the princess you love.***”

Goosebumps ran across his whole skin. Eyes wide in shock, Zidane did remember experiencing a strange rush inside him when he was about to tear the annoying jesters apart. He recalled the odd, terrified stare the twins had been giving him as the rage and the rush flowed through. He had not understood what had been happening to him and he had decided it was a simple adrenaline rush from his anger and emotional outburst. He had let the event slip since he hadn’t executed the Princess, now

Queen, the one he still couldn’t decide to love or hate anymore.

“***You felt the rising power coursing through your body, right, Zidane?***”

The younger angel couldn’t find his way through the words. “I… I…”

Stumped, Kuja caught Zidane to the shoulders, shaking him for an answer. “What?! Zidane, is this true?” he uttered, trying to keep his calm.

The younger boy mumbled through his answer. “I… felt something… but I didn’t know what it was… I haven’t realized…”

“***It was when I realized that poking Zidane to despair was not required and not the quickest way to make him achieve Trance. That day, I discovered there was one way, with complete certainty, to get him with that power. It was the initial plan I had in mind ever since he had attacked me while in Trance. This is where, you, Kuja, as the first Angel of Death prototype, will come in this play.***”

“What do you mean?” both brothers exclaimed at the same time. With the odd, calm laugh coming from the old man, the situation had just become gloomier for them.

“***Kuja, as the first Genome with a soul, from the beginning, you were not meant to last. Unlike all your siblings, soulless or not, you were programmed to expire prematurely until I could conceive a better Angel of Death. The day you are set to expire should be coming shortly, offering you no time to leave a mark on neither Terra nor Gaia, even if you were to succeed with your goal you had in mind to rule both worlds since the day of your creation.***”

Like his self was imploding from beneath, Zidane tossed all around him and burst into tears. “No!” he screamed and rubbed his eyes. “That’s a bunch of lies! That’s not true! You’re saying this to scare us!”

“***Your death will not be in vain. Your little brother will be conflicted, sad and confused. He will live his only true fear along with all the other complex emotions he will be struck with. He will be alone.***”

So, this was all true. Their old man knew them by heart; how his angels will fare, what they will become, who they will love and hate. He had planned this even before their creations. In a way or another, he truly was their god, to predetermine and write their destinies from the start. He even

possessed the knowledge that Kuja thought he was the only one to be cursed with. Garland knew Zidane's only fear.

To be alone.

The idea of Garland knowing them through and through terrified them.

"I-I don't believe you!" Zidane screamed with a wail following.

"***This will be the new catalyst like the event he had witnessed twelve years ago that will force him to enter Trance. It will be the loss of a loved one, his only true loved one, like when he was about to lose his dear princess. With no one to support him and to give him warmth, with the rest of the world knowing of his crimes against humanity, all he will desire will be the world's destruction, and mainly, Gaia. With the number of Gaians' lives dropping on the planet under his confusion, Gaia's crystal will weaken to the point it will be no longer proceed with the cycle of souls. Terra's crystal will be able to take over and fusion. Terra will be reborn anew and its souls will be revived.***"

Without realizing it, Zidane found himself on his knees, his head lowered in despair and his tears

streaming down on his hardened cheeks. Their little freedom had only been an illusion through their lives. Garland must have monitored them through the years like caged animals. It was no secret that Zidane feared loneliness, something even the boy had never grasped before. Now that Garland had mentioned it, the least he wished now was to see his big brother gone from his life. He had lost the Princess and now Queen who had loved him behind his back, once upon a time. He had lost his dragon companion which he grew up with.

He was going to lose Kuja. Without him…

He will be alone.

“K-Kuja! He’s lying! Say something!” the desperate boy wailed to his brother, stunned that his older sibling hadn’t added his words to it. He was worried by Kuja’s lack of reaction ever since he had learned of his imminent death.

And when he saw that assured, yet wicked smile cracking on Kuja’s lips, hope suddenly filled Zidane’s heart as if his heavy shoulders were lifted of some burden. When he heard the familiar chuckle from the older sibling, Zidane’s cold tears turned warm with joy and confidence.

"… Ha, ha, ha! Zidane's right," Kuja exclaimed, his voice gaining certainty and strength now. "How am I to die soon? I have never felt that reinvigorated in my entire life! How can you stoop so low as to tell us lies, Master Garland? Aren't you the perfect Terran creation?"

The old man's voice had not deterred from his usual, confident one. "***Even as I vanish from this world, my mission will be fulfilled by my greatest creation, Zidane. I have achieved the goal of my creators. My purpose is completed.***"

And then, like the weighty burden gone from them, they no longer sensed the old man's presence. Garland was now gone, for good.

Everything befell into silence.

…

"Kuja…?"

Zidane sensed like he had to be the one to break the silence. His worries now gone, he came closer to Kuja, expecting him to return a move or look back at him, but the silver-haired Genome appeared to be lost in thoughts, his former assured smile vanished. The blond boy gently shook him by the shoulders, trying to catch his attention. "Kuja!" Zidane called

again, unable to contain his smile. “Garland’s gone, for real this time! We did it! We’re free!”

Seemingly taken away from some dreamworld, Kuja shook his head in confusion before he gazed into his excited little brother’s eyes. They were filled with so much blind joy Kuja felt like he had to smile with him again.

“Yes, we did it, at last,” the older brother sighed in relief. “We’re free and we won’t be monitored anymore. We won’t have to do things without being reminded of our status as his servants, all for his ridiculous purpose. And better…” Kuja’s slender fingers went to his brother’s cheeks. “… Garland will not take control of you anymore.”

Unable to help himself, a laugh escaped Zidane’s throat as the boy leaped on Kuja, wrapping his arms around his neck by surprise, startling the elder sibling. The younger one even refused to let him go despite the small protest from him, still shaken by the lie Garland had told them, afraid to see Kuja gone for good. He was only glad that Garland had lied and Kuja’s death was not close. It was all that mattered to him now.

That preprogrammed death couldn’t be true, right?

Seeing that Zidane wasn’t near to release him, Kuja laughed and returned the hugging move. When he did, a sudden bawl surged out of Zidane’s mouth. As the boy was overwhelmed by grief and happiness to the point he was crying hard, Kuja realized he couldn’t feel the same level of emotions as his brother. Was Garland right about him? That Kuja had never developed these emotions he needed for the power of Trance to manifest itself because he had been created as an adult?

Garland was right, then. Kuja was a failed prototype.

But it did not matter now. Zidane didn’t care. He had his big brother, whether he was failed creation or a success. Kuja was all he required.

“Let’s… return home…” the elder sibling said, keeping up with his weak, relieving smile.

Blinking at him and taken aback, Zidane frowned at him. “B-But, what about your plan to rule the worlds?” he asked before he turned around, clueless. “And… how are we going to get home to Gaia?”

Kuja huffed another chuckle. Zidane’s comment was so innocent-sounding it reminded him of the silly kid he used to be. “Let’s think about it later.”

“You’re not going anywhere!”

That latest objection shattered their dreams to see real freedom for the first time. The shout came from down below where the Gaian group and their Genome little sister stood. The brothers looked down upon them and recognized the voice coming from that Tantalus young man who was serving the role of the Gaian group’s leader. To their surprise, he was the only one with his sword out in his hands and ready to attack. However, from such distance and altitude, no one was sure how Blank will even reach the brothers on this high pillar.

The others with him appeared reluctant to carry on with this fight, however.

“We will not let you rule Gaia after what you’ve done!” Blank continued to holler at them. “You’ve left our planet in ruins with millions of innocent deaths! We cannot forgive you for what you’ve done! You’re still dangerous to the world!”

His rage increasing, Zidane was about to jump down and give this young man a lesson until Kuja stepped in. He stopped his brother from jumping down by blocking him with an arm. “Kuja? What are you doing?” the younger sibling asked in the midst of his confusion.

“Let me deal with these insects,” Kuja hushed before he grinned and laughed at the Gaians.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Zidane quickly bounced before his brother as a protest. “We’ve come here together! We’ll fight these Gaians together too! They’re after us both!”

Their stares were glued on each other and their silence grew weirder. With a calm demeanor and a caring smile, Kuja raised a hand toward Zidane before a glow surrounded it. Struck by a sudden panic, Zidane grabbed his hand nervously, trying to cancel this spell. “K-Kuja! W-What are you doing?! Plea… Please… d… don’t… f-fight… a… lone…”

After forcing out a Sleep spell on his little brother, Kuja caught the slumbering Zidane before he landed on the ground. Grieved by gazing gently to the boy’s snoozing face, Kuja chuckled and caressed his cheeks and hair. When he laid the sleeping Zidane on the platform quietly, he slowly shook his head. “I am going to die, anyway,” he hushed, keeping his sweet smile on. “You don’t know this, Zidane, but Master Garland cannot lie. He was telling us the truth about my death. I don’t want you to… witness me die.”

He kissed the boy’s forehead before he stood back, turning to the Gaians, ready to face them, alone.

“***Good bye, Zidane.***”

He couldn’t tell how long he had been put in this cursed sleep until the time he came back to the world. But the commotion he heard during his awakening seemed to imply this had not been so long. Zidane immediately jumped on his feet, unaware of anything that could have happened during his short sleep. He looked down the pillar he was still standing on to see the Gaians present further below, not even exhausted after what looked like a short battle. Down their feet…

… Kuja was lying on the ground, his attire and clothes stained of blood.

“N-No…”

Tears ran down, soaking his shirt and the hair that had fallen over his face. He could no longer stop the bawls and whines from coming out. He knew it was futile to fight with his emotions. They were controlling him right now because the Kuja he knew,

grew up with and loved for his entire sixteen years of life was gone. The only one who loved him now had vanished from this world. The fear to be alone grew in strength in his heart and he could not contain himself from being overwhelmed by all the emotions in existence at once, except happiness.

A rising power coursed through his veins. A faint glow surrounded him, but he paid no heed to it.

As the rage and sorrow built in power inside him, a bright light flashed from within.

Just as Garland had predicted… after Kuja's demise…

Zidane achieved Trance.

Author's note*: The part where Garland casts a Sleeping spell on Kuja is an excuse to not write an action scene. Same with Kuja casting Sleep on Zidane. I know, that's dumb.*

Kuja not being afraid of dying is because I thought that since he's not living his life alone in this fic (unlike in the game), well, being someone's guardian gifts him a bigger courage to face his

ultimate demise. In the game, being alive was all Kuja had, so, of course, he didn't want to die.

Garland's speech after he "dies" was one of the parts I really, really wanted to write since I began this fic.

Chapter 25: Alone

Lack of days off made this chapter come late.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Chapter 25: Alone

As the Gaian folks were celebrating their victory from the outcome of their latest battle, they all had momently forgotten about the younger of the Tailed Brothers. Nothing would deter them away from their celebration until they noticed a bright light flashing above the pillar where the Genomes had stood together. When their stares were all directed to where the light came from, they were shocked to discover an unknown creature that appeared to hail from nowhere they had ever seen on Gaia. Was this thing native from Terra?

A furred, humanoid creature emerged from the pillar as it glided with a projected magic gust stemming from it.

It remained there, its calm, yet bright, fuming red eyes set on the Gaians.

Upon a closer inspection, Garnet was the first to gasp.

“No… Is that you?!” she exclaimed, eyes wide.

In an instant, the shining, pink furred creature teleported itself to the ground level, closer to the group where it remained afloat, its clawed feet never touching the ground and the flow of its radiating wind running through its hairs. Despite its manic and enraged expression with its never-stopping tears streaming down its cheeks, it appeared awfully quiet, perhaps so much it petrified the Gaians under fear.

That wrathful, yet innocent-looking face… It truly was the young tailed boy they knew as Zidane. He had achieved Trance, finally.

Unlike the Gaians, whether they kept their usual look under the same power, Zidane’s appearance under Trance had radically changed him. What used to be so human-like appeared like a tailed human with many animalistic features, bringing him closer to the aspect of a beast or even a furred primate. The shade of his skin had taken on a very pale, almost ghostly complexion. Where his clothes used to cover him, long, feathery pink, red and white fur had taken place over his bare skin. The nails on his hands and

feet had grown into fearsome, cutting claws and adopted a crimson hue like it had stolen the blood dye of all his past victims. His extended tail sported longer fur that could be seen dancing through the flow of the magic gust. His former long blond hair had turned wilder and messier, taking on a pink and red color with few extended feathers taking over his head that looked like the ones on the elder Angel of Death's hair.

Some of the worst changes were the elongated canines on his bared teeth and the wild, glowing color of his red eyes boiling with rage and despair.

All these indicated the birth of a feral monster.

"K-Kuja…" Zidane whispered, infuriated as he walked closer to the group, where Kuja lied on the ground.

Worried to see her former friend sinking further into misery, the Queen collected her courage and took a step ahead of the group, closer to the wrathful tailed boy and calling him shyly. Alarmed by her action, Blank intervened with his sword out, the blade of his weapon stained of the blood of their silver-haired foe. "Dagger, no! Don't g—"

Yet, Blank was not given enough time to finish his sentence when a violent gust pushed the group to the ground with the brief power of a hurricane. This unnatural, magical wind had been propelled from none other than the tailed young boy, a power that was confirmed to come from him when the Gaians looked up to see the remnant of winds and dusts twirling around him. This magic vanished around the palm of Zidane's raised hands as he continued to glide toward them slowly.

Was Trance also giving him the ability of magic? How was this even possible?

Ignoring the pain and struggle from the Gaians after their rude fall, Zidane crouched over the unmoving Kuja, his tears pouring down on his brother like a salty torrent. Not minding the blood around Kuja's stained lips, the glowing furred Genome brushed the crimson fluid off his cheeks. Reminded by all their nice moments during their younger days, Zidane poked his nose with his brother's own, trying to get the affectionate return he was so used to through his younger life. Unfortunately, Kuja did not return a move.

After all, it was to be expected from a dead man.

Shattered to despair, Zidane rubbed his eyes to wipe away the remaining tears blurring his vision. His attention was now drawn to the Gaians where he also spotted his sister healing the folks. She was the only one standing.

Even she could not help revive their elder brother.

What a traitor.

He refused to surrender his brother's body. No one will take him away, whether they were Gaians or Terrans.

Wrapping an arm around Kuja, Zidane soared higher in the air with him like he'd been able to fly his whole life. Now out of reach from the Gaians, it was decided that no one here deserved to thrive with their life when they had taken his brother's. They will have to die. They had asked for it, after all!

Using his free hand, Zidane began to whisper a spell before a bright light flashed from his rising palm. In one short instant, a powerful beam was fired high in the sky above until it descended into splitting lasers, hitting the Gaian group and his sister. The mad smile spread wide on his lips as he gazed at his foes falling down as they screamed one

by one beneath the explosive outbursts of the spell he had released upon them.

That powerful magic spell that Kuja had poured so much efforts and times to learn but which he had never achieved… Zidane was able to cast it after ascending to Trance.

The ultimate magic attack.

Ultima.

…

Zidane? What are you doing?

Oh, Kuja! Hi!

Wait, is that the Ultima book you borrowed years ago? Why do you still have it?

I'm practicing!

But you're going to need a tremendous amount of spiritual powers to cast it.

I know! But I've read the whole book at least ten times now!

Are you certain? You don't even like to read.

But this book's important! So, I'm reading it all the time! And… I think I know how this thing works, and I'll just… wait for the right moment to cast it, I guess?

You can barely cast a simple Fire spell.

But I'll continue my training anyway! I mean, you gotta need all the resources we have, right? If nothing works, then at least I might have Ultima ready!

Heh, you'll never change.

…

Zidane had been training behind everyone's back until this day to cast this ultimate spell Kuja had never managed to recreate. It was almost unfair, for one to possess such a weak magic potential to be suddenly filled with the greatest power known to this world. He didn't know how he succeeded the impossible… What if, in death, Kuja had given him his own powers…?

Kuja should have been the one to have this capability, not Zidane himself!

Only Trance could have given him this opportunity. If only Kuja was able to achieve this

innate ability, if only Garland had not been listening to their plans through their lives…

Yet, even at the peak of his potential, even with such an amount of power, Zidane was unable to go back in the past and change to save themselves from their fate. Time was a concept even the most powerful magic could not alter. It was too late.

With the Gaians crumbling at his feet, it was the more logical thing to think they were now gone from his life. He got his revenge. Maybe Kuja will be back now…!

"***Kuja!***" Zidane called, using their connected minds to contact his brother, hoping he'll be able to reach him.

There was silence.

"***Kuja, wake up! We beat the Gaians!***"

No response. The smile on his face turned uncertain and sour. The madness he had been trying to tame came back rushing through, clouding all the rationality he'd been clinging to. Kuja should have reawakened by now! Why was he still dead?

"***No, Kuja! You have to wake up!***"

…

*“**Please… Don’t leave me alone… I’m all alone now… Come back…**”*

If Kuja had to die, then… the rest of the world must too… Oh yes, everyone will join him. He will make them pay. All he had to do was to cast Ultima everywhere, and then, the rest will be a breeze. He will watch as everything die and disappear around him, and then… then…

Whatever. There was no need to think.

These tall pillar structures there. They were irking him. Ultima. More pillars there, how had they become so annoying to him? Ultima. Oh, more there, and there. Ultima.

Whoosh! Boom! Crash! All burning away, all crumbling, all gone. The world will die, the world was making him sad, the world that had killed his loved ones. By eliminating the world, his sadness will be gone and happiness will take place. He started to chuckle with an uncontrollable laugh which he had no idea where it came from, but the destruction and death around became a laughing matter as if everything was a hilarious joke. He had never felt so dead, yet so much alive, to kill and destroy.

With the nothing that will come out of the end of the world, he'll rule over a barren land, a place where nothing existed, where there was no sadness, no joy, no good and no evil.

The Zero World. How he longed to thrive in this perfect world he will call home.

Cough.

Wait… Where did that cough come from? He could have sworn he sensed a rumble from where he was holding the corpse…

"***Where… am… I…?***"

That voice, that too familiar voice…! It came from inside his mind!

"Ku… Kuja?!" Zidane nervously looked to the side to feel more shivers coming from the body he'd been holding with his arm, a body that was warm, breathing, moving, coughing. Kuja was alive! With a new happiness running, Zidane gently replaced Kuja over his arms like he was rocking his body like an infant. This move had already taken away the madness from the furred boy. With his rationality coming back to him, Zidane began to hush soft words despite the grounding and booming sounds of crashes and explosions all around. "Kuja, you're

alive… Thanks goodness… I thought… I thought Garland was right… that you've expired or something…!"

"Oh…" Kuja opened his eyes, but with his weakened state, his lids felt too heavy to lift them wider. He let them shut for convenience and he reverted to his telepathic link. "***Zidane… It's okay. The Gaians simply knocked me down… Albeit badly, but I am… alive…***"

Feeling the tears and his relieved smile surging again, Zidane began stroking Kuja's soft hair, ignoring the blood that had found its way there. "Let's go home to Gaia, for real, this time!" the boy exclaimed, his voice having regained the excited and joyful tone Kuja was so familiar with. However, the injured sibling didn't seem to share the same enthusiasm.

Confused and exhausted, Kuja let his body fall limp, forcing himself to rest over the comfort of Zidane's unusual furred arms. "***How… are we going to return home?***" he asked.

"I… I don't know why but… I just can fly… while in Trance!" Zidane cried with excitement as he glided with Kuja toward the portal far above in the dark sky of Terra.

“***Oh… Trance…***” Kuja’s light joy seemed to have slipped the moment he heard the word Trance like there was a hint of jealousy, but Zidane shrugged it off.

So, Zidane’s emotions must have truly conquered him, giving him the ability of Trance. Kuja took the guess Zidane must have achieved the power because he had been scared to lose his big brother. Zidane was indeed the perfect Angel of Death. Somehow, the thrill of pride jolted Kuja’s veins, but another part of this aspect disgusted and scared him to no end. The entire emotion and Trance details only proved the most terrifying fact.

Garland had planned this all along. The old man he despised so much for twenty-four years had been right. Even after death, his predictions came forth. He was still controlling their destinies from beyond the grave.

Thankfully, there were enough things to distract him away from these awful thoughts. All the sounds of destruction and explosions surrounding them did not sound like it was part of the usually calm and dead Terran environment. “***What’s… happening to Terra?***” the elder sibling asked, too tired to open his eyes.

“Nothing, nothing!” Zidane immediately replied with a gulp. “Just rest! There’s nothing to worry about! Sleep!”

For once, it looked like Zidane got the last, wiser suggestion. Allowing himself to rest within his brother’s arms again, Kuja began to find his peace of mind and let the time flow, finding the moment to sleep again.

Home sounded nice, despite all.

Kuja opened his eyes.

However, panic set in too fast when he grasped at the full darkness surrounding him. The colder weather and the far away sounds of wilderness were no helper, implying he was nowhere near their home in the desert. The alien sounds and the cold breeze brought him few shivers of terror. Because he could not see anything around him, he was afraid to move further away from his pose and spot, fearing that a random predator might lurk around and launch at him the instant it will see the weakened Genome.

Wait a minute. He was an Angel of Death, one made for a much greater purpose! Why should a

mere, dumb predator scare him?

Soon, all the recent events resurfaced like a clear hologram in his memories.

And Kuja was no longer certain if he should feel relieved and at peace, or nervous and desperate.

However, the relief became predominant as soon as he heard a familiar voice speaking by his side. “Hey, Kuja! Was about time you wake up!”

When he wasn’t sure where they were, the happiness in Zidane’s tone reassured him. The boy had such an innocent demeanor no one would be able to tell that he was actually Terra’s perfect Angel of Death. “Zidane…?” Kuja called his brother with his weak voice. The younger sibling smiled wide at him. The elder brother directed his eyes to where Zidane stood, still finding himself unable to rise from his pose. “Where are we…?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! We’re hidden underneath the Iifa Tree’s roots!” the younger Genome uttered shyly with such a great perceptible discomfort in his voice. “I lost my Trance power as I reached the Outer Continent, and I couldn’t fly anymore! So, hmm, there was no other shelter, and I saw Dagger’s group escaping with Mikoto and all with the Invincible.

They… They're still alive and all! So, huh, they're probably searching for us to… you know… kill us. You were too weak and I had to find a fortune shelter where I could protect you from the cold… I've found some giant leaves and I decided to keep you here with them to keep you covered and warm. I can't make fire or so when I'm not in Trance so… Ha, ha! Sorry about that!"

Yes, perhaps too innocent…

How will Kuja even find a way to tell Zidane that he had become an old man within? Garland might have crafted him to look like a beautiful young man of twenty something to the Gaian standard. Yet, deep inside, as preprogrammed by Garland, he realized his body was failing him to its entirety.

Just like a frail, dying old man.

It all started with that confrontation on Terra against these weak, puny Gaians. Before the battle had even been engaged, something abruptly had come as off to him.

There had been nothing before him.

Panicked, Kuja had been turning around frenetically, but wherever his head was turning to, there still had been nothing. There was no light, no

darkness, nothing at all. Still, he could hear, he could smell, he could sense something impaling him in the stomach and he could taste the sudden foul, metallic blood that was coming out of his mouth following the stabbing.

In the moment of a gasp, he had lost the ability to see, to gaze, to watch and observe. Kuja had become a blind man during the battle that had barely begun. That was the start of his body's decay toward his impending death, the one implemented by their dastardly master.

As the Genome was collapsing to the ground with an intensifying, unbearable pain, he could hear the Gaians uttering about how the most feared man on Gaia, the man who had brought calamity upon their world, had become a weak insect. He was no better than something they could crush with a simple stomp of their feet. The fallen man had tried casting a tiny Cure on himself, but there was something preventing him to use magic.

As if his body felt lighter, his spiritual powers seemed to have left him like something was draining him of his twenty-four years of efforts and experiences.

His last thoughts as he was driven to the depth of unconsciousness was the safety of his brother who he had left into a cursed slumber. Right, he shouldn't have casted Sleep on Zidane. In this exposed state, he was at his most vulnerable condition that could have gotten him killed by the Gaians too. Zidane could have died because of him.

Well, luckily, he had not.

Now, how could Kuja even tell Zidane that the process of his death had already begun to slowly drain of his vitality? The young Genome boy must still be so convinced that Garland's revelation about Kuja's upcoming mortality was a lie. Everyone but Zidane knew the truth. That programmed death was the only limit implemented by their creator that he won't ever be able to overcome.

Anyhow, death was part of life, as the latest step of all.

The young man couldn't do much in this state and he won't be able to do much anymore, but listening to the joy and innocence in Zidane's voice brought a smile on him. The young blonde was still such a child who didn't seem so different from the tiny brat that could barely speak ages ago.

Oh, how he'll miss this innocence…

Noticing that Kuja was not getting up from his improvised bed, Zidane began to worry. "Are you okay?" the younger brother asked, crouching over Kuja who hadn't flinched at him.

"I'm… good," the elder responded with his usual, yet weakened chuckle.

"You sure?" Zidane insisted on him, his expression growing more concerned, but of course, Kuja was unable to see it. For their sake, Zidane returned to his excited persona. "If you're hungry, I'll go catch something! There's a pond nearby with super clean water and it's bursting with fishes! I know you like raw fish and caviar too, so…"

"I'm fine," Kuja objected, his voice hoarser but still calm as he felt overwhelmed by Zidane's innocent insistence. Yet, he couldn't find a way to get angry at him for this. "I'm just… tired. I need the rest. Don't… worry about me."

His excitement reduced, Zidane dropped his arms and looked up, blinking at the light from their darkness of the roots' shadows. Keeping his mood bright, he said, "Man, I wish I could go get more Potions to heal you, but I've wasted the only two I

had on you! At least, it was enough to close the nasty injury you got from the Gaians and stop the blood flow! If only I had the magic to cast Curaga on you, you'd be up in no time! I've been thinking of going to Conde Petie to get supplies, but… the trip will probably get you killed… And the village's too far from here, and I can't leave you alone… If only you still had your magic in you…"

That last sentence had given Kuja some jolts down his spine and tail. So, Zidane knew Kuja could no longer cast magic. It must be his strange innate ability to feel others' spiritual powers that Garland had given him. At the very least, Kuja knew he did not have to hide this detail from Zidane. This was another relief among others as he didn't need to lie about his magic anymore.

"I… I don't want to lose you…" Zidane's voice had gotten quieter but sadder as it became mixed up with some sniffles. Kuja couldn't help but swallowed with guilt. "We lost Mahila already… I don't want to see you gone too… You're the only one… in my life now…"

The guilt hit him even harder.

Should Kuja tell him the truth? Or let him live his dreams of lies? Was the truth more hurtful than the

lie? And yet, Kuja liked to hear and feel Zidane's happiness while it lasted. Kuja was not even sure if he could bear his little brother's despair in this state.

But… if their sister Mikoto was still alive as Zidane had mentioned earlier, then perhaps there was a small chance that she could bring him enough light to reason him, to provide him the family he needed. Perhaps she will become Zidane's new world on a land where he will be able to experience love from others and the joy of life, now that Garland was gone and his hands were no longer tied.

He could only hope for now, because Kuja felt like a selfish coward.

He decided that lying to Zidane was the best choice.

When he expected death to come as a surprise at any moment, Kuja was more shocked when the following days went smoother than he had predicted. Somehow, thanks to Zidane's constant care and attention, the frail young man appeared in a slightly better shape. Until then, the man had been unable to even move his legs. Now, he was able to stand on his shaking feet like a toddler walking for the first

time. Thanks to his tail, the balancing on each foot went easier, though his legs were still weak. Everything went simpler when he could hang onto something like the Iifa Tree's vines or, more accessibly, his brother's shoulders.

Of course, without his sense of sight, he'd rather have Zidane lead the way.

Having his brother around was all about convenience. He'd lead the monsters away from their natural shelter. He'd bring fruits, some edible preys lurking around and best of all, he'd capture the best fishes from the pure, clear water of a nearby pond. Because of the slight regain of energy, Kuja recovered a part of his spiritual powers, allowing him to cast some weak Cure on himself and to create the most convenient Fire to cook the meat of their preys for easier chewing. A fire also gave them their opportunity to keep their bodies warm.

Still, Kuja missed the cozy, ancient home of the Desert Palace, the warm, nice mansion in Treno, the grand, majestic castle in Alexandria. An Angel of Death with great purposes was not meant to thrive in the cold and darkness of the wildlife! How he longed for that luxurious and easy life again!

But then, listening to Zidane bragging about the yummy prey he had caught or the juicy fruits he had collected from the nearby woods brought a bigger warmth to his heart, so much he felt like he should call these cold roots his new home. They found their peace in this wild and remote area, they were sustained with accessible, decent foods and Kuja was alive. It was all Zidane needed to be happy with his life, and perhaps Zidane's joy was all Kuja needed…

Since Kuja could walk again, Zidane thought it was time for a celebration. After all, in these crisis times, anything good and small was worthy of a celebration. With Kuja holding to his brother by the shoulders and neck and ignoring the blonde's dumb comment about how he looked like a baby monkey clinging to its climbing mother, Zidane ascended back above the roots. It was all toward where the sun piercing through the Mist brightened the area and where the weather got warmer. Kuja had been hidden in the darkness for too long and Zidane decided it was time for him to breathe purer air. Despite the spreading and broader Mist around caused by reasons unknown to both Genome brothers, it did not deter them from feeling a bigger freedom with the sun rays down their face.

“I’ve never realized how calming the sunrise is,” Zidane said as he began to sit down on the higher root.

Kuja said nothing to it. Surprised by his brother’s silence and the strange fact that he was still standing and looking up in a silly pose, Zidane exclaimed, “Hey, come sit with me!”

“Oh, hmm, sure,” Kuja stated, confused and staggering left and right. Slowly, he walked toward the direction where he thought he had heard his brother speak. However, the manner of his walking raised some suspicion to the younger sibling.

“Kuja, what’s… the matter? Are you sure you’re okay?”

Trying to find his way, Kuja said, “Yes, I’m o—”

He was not okay, it was obvious. Even someone with an awful attention like Zidane could see through the despair in Kuja’s face and legs that bumped straight to a very visible large vine. This had caused him to trip and collapse on the hard ground of the giant root. Panicking, Zidane rushed to him and caught him in his arms to see how his big brother faired after the silly, yet hurtful fall.

He was right. Kuja wasn’t fine at all. His body shivered between his arms like he was freezing, and yet, the atmospheric temperature was definitely warmer than where they had used to hide. Even his mouth was spitting blood like he was struck by internal injuries and his eyes, oh goodness… Zidane only noticed now with the brighter surrounding.

Kuja’s orbits were glassy and empty.

“K-Kuja! Can you stand up?! P-Please, be okay!” Zidane exclaimed in distress while shaking Kuja who appeared to be weakening by the seconds.

But there was a long silence until his thoughts were broken from the depth of his mind.

“***Can’t… speak…***”

What? What was this? Why was Kuja speaking from within now? “***No! Kuja! Don’t tell me it’s getting worse! You were doing so well!***” Zidane reverted to their connected minds. He tried keeping a confident tone, but truthfully, he was slowly losing his cool and he even started fighting some tears. Once again, he shook Kuja whose limbs were becoming heavier and limp. Even his silver tail had stopped twitching.

“***Zidane…***” the frail young man weakly called, his eyes fighting to find where the face of his brother went, but Zidane saw the struggle in his eyes. There was something with his eyes, that was for sure! Kuja’s thoughts went through a painful haze, and yet, he tried keeping up with coherent words from their telepathic connections. Zidane had to hear him out.

“***I… cannot see you… anymore…***”

“Huh?” the blond boy dumbly said loud, uncertain of Kuja’s meaning but he returned to their mind talking. “***What do you mean by this?!***”

Soon, more blood poured out of Kuja’s mouth. As Zidane desperately shook him again, Kuja sensed that his sibling might have given up on hope when he felt the tears dropping on his face. Despite the obvious denial from him, Zidane was aware of the truth now.

“***Zidane, let me… tell you something…***”

The boy began to take a huge breath to calm himself, but Kuja still felt the weak quivers rushing on his brother’s arms. Satisfied with the calmer stance, Kuja continued, but he sensed his life leaving

by the seconds. He had to be as fast as the time will allow him…

"***Master Garland… He… He can't lie…***"

"***What? Why do you say that?!***" Why was Kuja bringing the name of that despicable man now? Garland was already gone to never be seen or heard again! There was no need to be reminded of some dead entity that they hated and that had been manipulating them from the day they were created!

But deep within, Zidane remembered. He recalled each words Garland had told them that day on Terra. He had tried to forget these words, but why was Kuja reminding him of them?

The dying young man continued, "***You remember… what he said on Terra… I can tell…***"

"***What are you talking about?***"

Still in denial…

"***Master Garland… He has been right, all along… He was telling us… the truth, that I am… programmed to die…***"

Outraged, Zidane began to protest as the tears ran wilder. "***B-But that's dumb! Everyone will die someday, so, of course, he has been right about it!***"

How could Zidane still be in denial? Was he forcing through it? This appeared so forced this was becoming a nuisance for his remaining life and Kuja considered giving up and letting his body die now. However, hearing the sadness and despair out of Zidane's mind stopped him fast from being angry at the boy. It prompted a weak, friendly smile on the silver-haired man like this was somewhat funny. Yet, the younger one wasn't finding this funny at all.

"***Yes, that's about right. But I am to stop… very soon, in a matter of minutes… I feel it coming… It hurt so much where my body has not become numb…***" The bawls and tears had increased over Zidane, and the guilt for causing his sadness washed over Kuja as he heard the whines and received more teary drops on his face. Kuja felt like the bad guy of his family, for forcing the despair out of his poor brother. "***My senses… are failing… I have never dared telling you but… I have become blind… ever since we had escaped from Terra…***"

Zidane had actually gotten suspicions over Kuja's blindness, but the denial in him had been running tough ever since they had left Terra. Deep in his heart, the big hope he had kept for himself since then was withering. For all these days, that thought of "as long as there's life, there's hope" had been

strong until now. Kuja was still clinging to his life, but…

… Kuja only clung to his life so he could prolong his life with Zidane to tell him his last words, even if the boy was weeping and sobbing like a child.

"***I… can no longer feel my legs and my tail now… The sensation… to the tips of my fingers are starting… to leave me… The numbness… is spreading to my arms and soon… the rest… And my mind too… will shut down.***"

"***N-No… You can't say that!***"

It hurt so much to be able to sense the voice and the emotions from their connected minds. However, what brought him a bigger pain to his heart was that he could still feel Zidane's trembling and sudden shaking of his head as he heard his words. If Kuja was able to cry, he would gladly do so right now, but even if he could, his body will not obey the commands.

The least he could do was to maintain his smile on, which spread a little wider at the next thought.

"***And… Master Garland was right… on another important detail… That you… were and still are his perfect Angel of Death all along…***"

That very comment was messing with Zidane's temper. The boy did not believe why Kuja was still bringing this up now. Was he trying to provoke him? "***Fuck this whole Angel of Death thing!***" he screamed out of their mind, and Kuja sensed Zidane's hands turning into shaking fists. "***Why do you care, Kuja?! Why do you think I should even care about this?!***"

"***I am telling you this because… Master Garland cared… He counted on that, and… you did exactly as he had planned, at least on Terra… I should have seen his plan… back then… But I was such a failure…***"

"***No, you're not! I don't care what Garland said about you! You're just you!***"

"***His plan… to use me to raise you… For you to love me, and no one else… From the day you grow and train enough until the day I die… You developed all these emotions from your early childhood until now… for you to reach Trance… which you did on Terra… I could not see, but I could hear it… With the power of Trance, you can… destroy entire worlds… It was all part of Master Garland's calculating plan…***"

"***N-No! That's not true!***" Poor Zidane, Kuja heard him crying even harder. "***That b-brotherhood between us… it has nothing to do with him! Garland did not create this! We d-developed it t-together!***"

"***Zidane… You do realize that… I'm telling you all this because… I want you… to change…***" At this point, Kuja was too exhausted to keep up with his smile. He dropped his confident façade to show that he cared, that he wanted the best for his little brother who could not stop crying. "***Until now, you've done… everything Master Garland had predicted… I want you to realize that… you need to change your ways, so… you won't do as the old man had predicted… I am going to die, you can no… longer deny this… But please… don't go mad, Zidane, because this is what Master Garland had wanted you to become… Don't let him… control you beyond his grave… You have the potential to change for the better… You are much better than him… or I…***"

The very comment had gifted the boy a small break from all his crying. It was hard thinking through Kuja's words, but they were too important to just pass by them. During his sniffle, Zidane nodded. Kuja could not see it, but he felt his

brother's body following the nodding movement, which was enough to offer Kuja some peace of mind.

And suddenly, Kuja could no longer feel Zidane's trembling. His numbness had spread through this upper body now, sparing his head and thus his mind as well. At least, he still had some more cherished moments to speak with his little brother.

"***If only… If only I was able to proceed with my plan… of dropping you on Gaia, twelve years ago…***"

"***W-What?!***" the boy exclaimed, his sadness momently gone, leaving him in a confusion state instead. "***You were… going to abandon me…?***"

He could no longer hear Zidane's crying. Kuja had lost his sense of hearing, but he was thankful he could still listen to him with their connected minds.

Kuja was not certain if he should reveal about his plan from twelve years ago, but now, it didn't really matter. "***It was for this very reason… Master Garland was going to take my soul away when he found out about my plan… It was my punishment for trying to get rid of his perfect Genome… If I did, things might have gone… for your best… I***

wanted to save you… from madness, from him… And yet…" Slowly, he shut his eyes, exhausted by all this long mind speaking. It was taking all his strength, but Kuja forced himself to cling to that thin thread of life, for Zidane's sake. "***I never regretted raising you, even at the cost of my freedom… even if it was Master Garland's plan… Without you, my life would have been so… boring, and I would have been… all alone…***"

He could not feel the tears drowning down on his face anymore, but he detected the growing sadness and despair in Zidane's shared mind. "***Kuja…***" the boy whined.

"***My only regret was that… I've been manipulating everything around you… so that n… no one else l-loved you…***"

It was getting harder to communicate now.

"***Huh…?***" Zidane's distress suddenly turned into a shock by the reveal like he had not expected this.

"***I've… m-manipulated… people… even the Princess… to hate you… so y-you… don't soften to t-them… I was afraid… to be a-alone… again…***"

Yet, Zidane's short anger faded as quick as it came. Kuja could tell that watching the one he loved

the most on his death bed was far more preoccupying than whatever the rest of the world was to him for now.

Kuja was so sad to not feel his brother's touch anymore. His entire body had gone numb and his core was starting to depart only to leave a soon-to-be empty dead husk, but at least his mind still gripped to this world. Please, only few more seconds…

"***It's… It's okay, Kuja… It's okay, please stay…***"

Now, even his mind was going numb.

"***Zi… dane… I have… always… loved you… Do… don't cr…***"

His mind left.

…

I won't die, and you will not either. They will never know our plan. Princess Garnet will never use Eidolons on us.

But… it still can happen! Maybe she'll know and when she knows why her father died, she'll want revenge! She still can attack you and kill you!

It won't happen. I will not die.

You… You promise me?

I cannot promise anything.

No! You have to promise me you won't die!

Fine, I promise, then.

"… ***I promised…***"

…

A promise Kuja was unable to hold to. A meaningless, old and short promise made in the spur of the moment that was coming back to torment his latest seconds in this world as his soul returned to the dying Terran crystal.

Garland was right. As pre-programmed into his first artificial Angel prototype, after his twenty-four years of life with a given soul…

Kuja lost his battle against fate and death claimed his life.

…

"***Kuja…?***"

…

"***Kuja, please, say something…***"

…

“***Kuja, please! Don’t leave me!***”

…

“H-Hey, Kuja!” Zidane reverted back to his voice, hoping to see some change. “I-I know you’re just f-faking it! C’mon, open your eyes! C-Come… on…”

…

…

That tiny, thin thread of hope that Zidane held on to see that Kuja was going to be okay shattered slowly when he saw no change. Bringing the overwhelming tears back raining over his brother’s lifeless husk, Zidane could no longer control his throat as hiccups and whines barred him from speaking more words. On this desolate land with nothing but the wind to accompany him and the sole living Genome brother to break the silence, Zidane’s bawls were heard in the whole valley, resounding his sorrow around the Iifa Tree, Kuja’s mark of death.

How ironic… These dastardly roots created millenniums ago by the master they had pursued through their lives had become his brother’s tomb.

Draping his tears and his face over his palms after depositing the body at his knees, Zidane began to call Kuja over and over as if his calls could be heard by someone, by an entity that might help him relieve of his pain and his suffering. Or better, if a god or something might give Kuja his second chance… Zidane knew they might have been the bad guys in this sad, depressing tale of Gaia, but if only they had been able to cut the thread Garland had leashed upon them early in their lives… Perhaps… Perhaps they would have led a life of peace and love where there was no need to spread evil and war.

But the Terran chains had forced them. They had no choice; their entire destinies were programmed as such by an artificial being.

It all led to where Zidane stood now. He was living his only true fear.

He was alone.

His trembling limbs softly caught the lifeless shell that used to be his dear brother. Zidane stared at Kuja's peaceful face, the one he will wear for long as if frozen in time until he will become nothing but dirt and dust as an unrecognizable corpse. As more tears blurred his vision, the boy sank his face onto

his elder sibling's chest and cradled him like a sleeping child.

What was he doing? No! This was supposed to be Kuja's task, to take care of him, to cherish him, not Zidane's! Kuja was his caregiver, the one who had watched him grow from a tiny baby to a young adult, like a parent should! And yet, the cradling action relieved and calmed him like he was able to pour some life into the emptiness of this beautiful corpse.

Time had stopped for him, as long as Kuja remained in his arms.

"***Kuja, I love you too, big brother… I love you…***"

When he looked up to the sky, he did not realize he had been slumbering into sweet dreams. His awakening brought him back to the nightmare of the reality that will haunt him for long, long years. He coveted more sleep to forget this real life he hated so much, where there was no more family and no more love. However, the sun's location seemed to indicate the end of the afternoon. Perhaps he'd been sleeping

for hours, or few more. He didn’t know and he didn’t care.

However, what had stirred him away from his great slumber was not any kind of sound of the wilderness and the wind flowing through this valley. It was definitely not the now stiff and rigid lifeless husk of his brother that produced any sound. Rather, the noises sounded like it was coming from another world out of the Outer Continent. They were alien to the wildlife and familiar surroundings of the Iifa Tree.

These were the sounds of grounding engines.

As he looked up to the sky in the horizon, where the Mist reigned and partly hid the sun, an armada of war airships surrounded the area. All thanks to the raging spreading Mist, battleships from the three great kingdoms had been able to cross the oceans to settle this once and for all. It was all to rid their planet of the Tailed Brothers who were potentially the most dangerous beings that had ever walked on Gaia. Among the airships, he was able to spot the Invincible, most likely piloted by one of Queen Garnet’s friends or even the Queen herself. After all, the Invincible was easy to control.

Were they really coming to end him?

Yes, that must be it. The Gaian group had seen Zidane under Trance. They knew what he was capable of. He was a threat to the entire planet alone. With that Mikoto girl among them, they certainly knew of Garland's plan to make his precious Angel of Death spread destruction after the death of his first prototype, the failure.

Bringing all the armies of all Gaian kingdoms was their only way to gain a tiny fragment of hope to see Zidane's demise.

So, that was it. It was the world against the Terran Angel of Death.

I want you to realize that… you need to change your ways, so… you won't do as the old man had predicted…

But how could he even change his ways when these Gaians were going to kill him and steal his brother away? No, this won't do. Zidane had to do something. He had to let them know that he won't give up that easily.

He could not tell why, but a smile spread onto him when he gazed at his unmoving brother. "Hey, Kuja!" he exclaimed out like Kuja heard him. "Do you see this? They want to kill us! They want to

steal you from me! But… you know what? They can’t! I’ll show them! I’m no longer the little boy you used to know, just watch me!”

After giving the stiff body a tender stroke on the hair, Zidane turned away from it, unsheathing his daggers before a surging growl resounded from his throat. Feeling the rising adrenaline rush and the strength growing from the inside, his body began to give away a faint glow with the pink and long fur pushing out of his skin.

He was ready to protect Kuja at all cost, no matter the price.

…

“Hey, I’ve been wondering ever since we’ve reached this new continent… Why are we sending so many soldiers and warships to fight two guys?”

“Have you even been listening to the Alexandrian Queen and that thief friend of hers?! These two guys you’re speaking of have insane powers and strength! The younger one’s apparently able to achieve Trance, and the Queen said that when he did that one time, he destroyed a world at whole all by himself!”

“What? Do you truly believe that one guy’s capable of such feat?”

“Well, not a normal person, but these guys aren’t even Gaians and they’d been apparently created and engineered by a mad scientist, so who knows what they can achieve?”

“Wait, so if what you’re saying is true, then, that means… we’re running straight to our death?!”

“…”

“Wait, on the roots below…”

“Yeah?”

“There’re two guys, I think…”

“Do you think it’s them?”

“Can’t say. One seems to be sleeping or something. But the other… he looks all weird and glowing and pink-ish and ready to fight… Oh no… wait…”

Before the two soldiers could even utter another word, that pink-ish creature they’d been observing flied straight to the deck of their airship in a matter of seconds like it’d been teleporting itself, always levitating above the floor. The soldiers had no time to unsheathe their weapons that the flying creature rushed through them like lightning, slicing their throat without them realizing it. The others soldiers

watched in horror as their two companions fell like nothing had happened as everything went in a flash, leaving everyone unprepared for this fight they had no chance to see through the end alive.

The levitating creature's furred arms drenched of the blood of the fallen ones, it left its daggers to its sheath before it raised a hand, its palm facing the soldiers who rushed at it in a war cry. And just as they were about to reach it, they were pushed away by a violent burning blast of several beams piercing each of them through their bodies. The killing beams blasted through their airship, destroying the flying vehicle and frying all who were abroad.

One airship down. Hundreds more to go.

Zidane soared to another ship, scaring the soldiers abroad before he unleashed another Ultima attack without any warning but his presence alone. Another frying ship down.

However, the other airships showed no sign of retreating. They were determined to end this Genome's life for good.

Ugh, stupid Gaians. Could they just not see it? They won't win this war. Why were they still trying to kill him? Couldn't they have simply left him

alone and thought it was the better choice? Truth be told, Zidane had already been ready to leave them alone if this wasn't for this gigantic armada coming to see his demise. Were they willing to sacrifice thousands, perhaps millions just to defeat one lonely, yet extremely dangerous Angel of Death? Were they still hanging on that dumb thing they called "hope"?

He'll toss that hope away from them, for sure. If Zidane could not have his own hope, then no one deserved it.

BOOM!

With an astounding shock, Zidane saw cannonballs fired at him, which he avoided quickly. They were followed by several magical attacks from some of the mages that must be present among this great flying armada. A Thundaga and Blizzaga combined spell hit him hard, enough for him to scream and sustain some injuries under his cover of long fur. Zidane momently flashed away from his spot, finding a short shelter to cast Curaga on himself, a spell he had seen Kuja cast enough time to be able to use it in his Trance form now. Back to his full shape, he decided to take more caution and waste his energy on another spell. In the bat of an eye, a Meteor attack emerged from the sky, stopping

all the next cannons that were launched at him. More were shots, but he stopped them all once again with another Meteor spell.

He ducked another Thundaga attack, and by flashing from spot to spot, he was able to find another ship full of sorcerers. To get rid of them, Zidane propelled an Ultima attack on the ship, blasting the airship mechanics and drowning its passengers down the abyss where they all found their demise.

And despite the death toll, the rest still showed no sign of resigning. When will these Gaians stop?

Whatever. Here, more Ultima. Boom. Fire. Crash. The screams of all falling soldiers and the sounds of explosive destructions of the airships felt to his ears like an appeasing orchestra of relief and he coveted to hear more of it. That harmony of death and war brought a smile and a cathartic rush over his skin, and he craved for more thrilling experiences. Blood was shed, things were falling, death was everywhere. He loved this, like a true Angel of Death pre-programmed and manufactured by a mad delusional old man.

Then, the sky had become dark while he saw the ground tremble far below. A familiar roar

resounded.

Bahamut.

The great Eidolon soared before him, ready to finish the little Genome for its fouth time.

He was right. His past crush, Garnet, was around.

… So what?

Zidane’s smile twisted into a malicious grin. He had never been so ready to face that puny Eidolon that used to haunt his past. He was no longer the weak child he used to be. The idea of fighting one of the most powerful legends that had transcended on Gaia’s history sent him an intense, purifying shiver down his spine.

When Bahamut gathered its energy with its mouth to give this small Terran creature a wide, powerful beam, it was stopped by a much more threatening blast that came from its much tinier foe in Trance. A blast of Ultima was enough to send the great dragon to its downfall as the beam pierced through its chest, opening a wide gap in the legendary monster. Bahamut gave away a booming shriek resounding through the Iifa Tree valley before it fell to the ground in pain, vanishing to the unknown it came from.

The supposedly indestructible Eidolon was defeated by a mere mortal.

Zidane could now focus his attacks on the rest of the armada.

He had no idea how long he went like this, but watching the world agonizing before him because of everything he had killed and wrecked pumped himself into wishing for more and more of this satisfying destruction. When the few remaining airships that he could count on two hands finally left the area, when he spotted the Invincible leading the rest of the defeated armada to retreat, he was struck by an alarming realization.

Among the mess of destroyed airships and mutilated and burnt bodies…

Where was Kuja?

…

Oh no! Hopefully, he had not sunk under this pile of destructions!

Trying to think through, he launched himself away to where he thought to have left his brother. Overtaken by panic, he realized that all these fights and injuries he had sustained made him forget about

Kuja's location. How could he have forgotten such a crucial location? Why did he have to possess such a terrible sense of direction? He stopped from his track, taking a pause to breathe slowly now that the remaining Gaians had escaped and left him for good, hopefully…

He soared all around the ruins of this battlefield, but all he could see was the vast, endless hecatomb of the Gaians' defeat. His heart pumped faster at the depressing prospect of never seeing his big brother ever again. "Kuja? Kuja?!" he called, hoping he will get a reply, somehow. Of course, there was no other response than the dying sounds of the motors of the leaving ships grounding in the horizon and the remnant of crackling flames from the ships' cemetery.

Then he heard a sniffle, which came from his own throat and nose.

He had lost Kuja.

Wailing and sobbing with the torrent of tears escaping his eyes like a little child who had lost a parent and caregiver, Zidane rubbed his stinging eyes. Hopeless, he flied back to the roots down below, where he could sense the power of Trance departing. Back to his regular form, he couldn't fly

anymore, but it did not matter. Nothing could help him in this personal quest to find Kuja. He sank deeper into sorrowful thoughts of being lost the rest of his days on this barren planet.

There was no hope.

As the Mist evaporated around him, he turned to each direction, startled by the dispersion of the fog of the lost Gaian souls disappearing from the Iifa Tree. Stumped and exhausted, he sat down and looked to the ground, his head low in defeat with the feeling of loneliness.

Wait…

Something in the darkness, below the giant roots of the tree… It stood out.

Could this be…

“Kuja!” he yelled after his brother, this time his tears no longer blurring his vision and his smile coming back. Losing no time, he descended fast into the depth of the valley of roots, bouncing from higher to lower levels. As he approached his goal, he distinguished Kuja, positioned like a bloodied ragdoll among the chaos of the rock grounds. His body must have fallen down during the war and his attire had become a mess.

But Zidane didn’t care. It was his dear Kuja.

He caught the body between his arms and pulled it into a caring embrace, dragging his fingers along the cold, pale cheeks of his brother. He cradled with it before he looked up in the sky where parts of the sun lightened the darkness where he was.

Exposed to the gentle sunrays that were dying as the sun set, Zidane gently laid the stiff body on the giant roots. Overjoyed to have found his brother again, Zidane crouched besides him, not minding all the stains of blood that had found their ways on the body. Finding the calm of the valley a blessing peace to enjoy, Zidane sat beside the deceased brother he loved, giving him a soft stroke to his feathered locks of silver hair, hushing comfort words. “Kuja, I did it. I beat the Gaians,” he said like a proud kid to his parent. “They couldn’t take you away from me. You’re safe now.”

As the night set and strange wisps of light began to float around him, Zidane yawned. Everything that had happened in the span of few days had exhausted him. Having rushed into Trance and fighting all these evil Gaians had depleted his energy and his will for life, and right now, all he needed was a good sleep.

He lied himself by his brother's side and he shut his lids, hoping to get these tears away from his eyes and to get himself out of this nightmare.

The nightmare of being alone for the rest of his life.

***Author's note**: I've kinda reimagined Trance Zidane in this AU as different from the in-game, looking more like Trance Kuja to make him more menacing and eviler, or weirder/furry-like, depending on point-of-views, lol. I always thought his in-game Trance form looks too much like a silly cute monkey, though I was kind of disappointed that Trance Kuja didn't look like a cute monkey at all. :(*

I made him a Deus Ex Machina thing too, suddenly being able to use magic as if he had unwillingly absorbed Kuja's potential or something. Dunno, I thought it was a good idea, though that kind of made him a Gary Stu.

That part after Kuja died was so hard to write that I had to type it, delete it all and retype it again.

And nope, this is not the end of this fic. Few different endings to come (bad endings and good

endings)!

Ending 1: Reward

This ending is the most depressing one, but I'll have happier ones, promise.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Ending 1: Reward

Zidane woke up to an odd stench hanging in the air along with the scent of old meat and dry blood.

Yet, the smell did not deter him away from his pose. Having been asleep on his shoulder in a strange pose on this hard ground had offered him a nasty cramp to the arm. He cursed himself for having slept in this silly pose, but then, who was here to judge him for being dumb when there was no one else in the area? And where did he suppose he could find a more comfortable shelter? The Iifa Tree roots weren't made to be nice, cozy homes.

Well, at least he still had Kuja besides him, which he soon came with a sad realization from where the unpleasant scent came. This was more than a simple disappointment, considering his elder sibling had always had a pleasant smell, having being keen with

his own appearance and body odor when he used to be thriving. A pleasant perfume, never too strong, never too dim. Always the perfect scent of roses and lilac.

Right now, the cold body looked like nothing but a pale cadaver whose blood had sunk down at the bottom of itself by the gravity. Around here and there, Zidane spotted some crawling and flying insects that had begun to breakdown his brother's corpse by scavenging all the exposed parts, let it be nostrils, mouth, eyes and ears…

"No, go away! Leave Kuja alone!" the boy shouted after the bugs and tried shooing them away with his hands, but the stinking bugs were persistent, annoying things. Even if he'd kill these foul insects, he could not get rid of them all. They might be small, but their numbers will continuously win over him.

After some minutes of fighting against the insects, Zidane realized this whole body-breaking was a disgusting part of the cycle of life and death. He had to give up this silly battle.

Nevertheless, he could not gather himself to leave the body here. Kuja deserved a proper burial, whatever the Gaians said about him. Using Kuja's

torn clothes to attach the body to him, Zidane combined his strength to climb back to the surface, where he will be left some more times to think where he could leave him in his peaceful death. Life around the Iifa Tree was a barren world. He had to walk far away.

After a long hour of climbing and walking with the body on his back, when it was time to pay attention to the area, he realized something was amiss.

The world appeared different.

No, this was not the hecatomb left by the battle against the Gaians earlier. Rather, among the trees and the grasses, tall, blue and rocky mushroom-like structures stood erect, reminding him of the semi-familiar place he used to call home when he was a toddler. These were definitely Terran structures, but unlike the epoch he'd been on Terra, these structures in the horizon looked… more alive, more organic, with the fauna and canopy having already taken over them.

Wait a second. He had just left the Iifa Tree. He swore to himself that he was standing on Gaia. He battled, he walked and he slept on Gaia. Why was he

seeing structures from his home planet Terra? What happened?

If only Kuja was here, he would have the answer.

“Kuja…”

After more senseless walking, exhausted, Zidane couldn’t stand on his feet anymore. He put his brother on the grass and tried to change his stiff ragdoll pose, which he was unsuccessful with. He gave him a long melancholic gaze, letting the breeze flow through Kuja’s only soft part of his body, his long silver hair. Watching his hair dancing was like staring at a peaceful sleeping older brother who had no need to worry about petty things like a mean old man and a war to plan.

For an instant, Kuja looked alive.

Unable to move on, Zidane burst into tears again and sank his head into his brother’s chest, letting the torn clothes stained of dry blood absorb the torrent from his eyes.

As he let the time progress to allow his crying to subdue and his tears to stop, Zidane began to have a pleasant thought about one of the Gaian beliefs. Gaians told their loved ones that when someone died, they went to the sky, where they will watch

over their family and friends from above until they came to join them. This was a belief Zidane wished it came true for Kuja, to know that his brother's spirit was still watching over to tell him that there was nothing to worry about, that there will be a greater future ahead for him. To the Gaians, Kuja was in another world where the departed lived as eternal souls and kept their memories, living in parallel from the world of living.

But the advanced culture and science of his home planet forced the knowledge that Kuja was now a lost soul that had returned to the Terran crystal, where his memories sustained the crystal to allow it to thrive. The soul of his elder brother had now blended into a mixture of other lost souls, waiting to be reborn. If Kuja had been lucky, perhaps he went to Gaia's young crystal instead…

Having the privileged knowledge that his older sibling was not watching over him meant that Zidane was alone.

Like a kitten coveting his mother's warmth, without even realizing it, Zidane crawled between Kuja's rigid arms, hoping to see these cold arms gaining enough heat and life to hug back his little brother.

“Kuja…” Zidane whispered, struggling to contain the sorrow and madness that wanted to take over him.

“***Zidane…***”

The blonde bounced at the call that had startled him away from his reverie. The call was heard from beneath his mind, but the voice did not sound like Kuja nor the mean old man. No, instead, it was the voice of a girl. He had a recall of having heard that voice at least once, but the voice had been so forgettable that he had no real care for it, considering the circumstances of his trip to Terra and the aftermath.

Jumping back on his feet and alerted, he adopted his usual attacking stance and he unsheathed his daggers. Where some of the Gaians bodies lie, he spotted a silhouette standing ahead and walking forward him, the bright orange sun behind them hiding their identity. The same silhouette was soon followed by more similarly shaped shadowy forms from which details of their faces were still hidden by the sun.

But these silhouettes were familiar enough for Zidane to recognize them as his own kin. Semi-long hair, a tail swaying left and right as they walked…

Yes, they were his soulless Genome siblings.

What were they doing on Gaia?

Now, he remembered the voice that had called him. Mikoto was her name, right? He recognized her silhouette from the Genome who walked faster than the others as she led them closer to him, but he could not tell why she was coming to him. As the group got closer, Zidane took a breath in, trying to remain calm and putting his daggers back to his sheaths.

Knowing they were no threat to him, he kneeled back to his brother's body as if he wanted to protect him from them. What if his Genome siblings required Kuja's corpse?

His frown deepened. As the anger continued to grow the closer they came to him, he couldn't take his thoughts away from a particular detail. The very existence of these Genomes was one of the reasons he had been doing all these atrocities. It was because of them that Kuja and Zidane's hands were tied to their purpose.

They were the reason for his demise, his loneliness.

Mikoto's silhouette turned into a sharper image now that she was only few meters away from him,

revealing the same bright turquoise eyes that held a soul, just like his.

"***You have… succeeded…***" she told him in their connected minds.

"In what?!" Zidane burst at her as he tried taming the rage boiling inside him. However, he was suddenly taken aback when he noticed something strange on the Genomes behind his "sister".

There was life in their eyes.

Did they gain a soul too? Zidane did not remember the soulless Genomes from his childhood, but they did not look like the empty vessels Kuja had described to him so often… With these lively, curious eyes, they were all staring at him now…

It felt so strange, to look at them as if he looked into multiple mirrors…

Realizing that her "brother" refused to use their connected minds, Mikoto reverted to her physical speech. "Gaia's crystal… has been assimilated by Terra's crystal. It is thanks to you for having defeated the Gaian armies. Gaia's crystal has gotten weak enough to allow Terra's crystal to take over. The fusion is a complete success."

Well, that certainly explained the blue mushroom-like structures all around. After all, he had never seen these things on Gaia… Oh, and that seemed to explain that the other soulless Genomes didn't look as soulless as Kuja had led him to believe through his life. The Terran souls must have reawakened in the Genome vessels, just as planned by Garland. Did that mean he was on Terra rather than Gaia now…?

"Oh," Zidane responded, not putting more care into his words or Mikoto's great revelation. Not like he cared much since his fate remained the same. So, Gaia had become Terra, or Terra had become Gaia… or they were just both planets together… Did that mean that all the remaining Gaians were still alive too?

And suddenly, he thought of her.

Garnet.

Oh goodness, why was she suddenly crossing his thoughts in such circumstances? Like he needed to add more to his worries right now! He had always tried to control his crush for her during Kuja's presence, but without him now, it felt like Garnet became his sunshine once again, in a world where he was condemned to live alone.

How he craved to be with someone, to be able to share friendship and his hardships, to have someone to love and to return love. If only Zidane could undo his past… He could be free to love her again, to allow her to love him again, even if it had to be behind his back… But she was a Queen now. She knew the truth of her father's death by his own hands and she had witnessed her mother's death in the not-so-direct hands of Kuja. In theory, both him and Kuja had killed her real parents, ten years ago, during the genocide against the Summoners of Madain Sari. If he could undo all this, perhaps he wouldn't even have to worry about what was happening to him now…

There was not a single chance for him to be loved by her, ever again. There was nothing else to lose than the tears he did not bother to hide, even before all his Terran kin.

Heartbroken by Zidane's tears, Mikoto chose to ignore them, nevertheless. She continued to speak, this time with a shy smile. "The Genomes are starting to welcome the Terran souls. You have revived Terra. We can only be grateful."

Zidane had guessed right. This was why the other Genomes looked so alive… His vessels family, all

thriving and provided with the same kind of emotions he grew up with. They might see him as a family and as a friend for having revived them…

And yet…

Why could he not find any joy in this? He had given them life by destroying everything, by losing everything. How was this better for him? The Genomes were grateful for him, but he was not grateful at all. He had lost all his loved ones over this stupid plan, over his programmed destiny. Couldn't Mikoto see this too? She was made just like him and Kuja! Like Garland, she, too, must have spent her life listening to all their telepathic conversations he ever had with Kuja; their hardships, their problems, their love…

Mikoto should have understood him… right?

And then…

"***Zidane, my Angel of Death.***"

No… Not him… Please not him! Garland, the mean old man… Why could he hear him again? He was dead as a tree log! He was gone, vanished, lost!

The existence of that old man came to haunt him again with an insanity that had now started growing

stronger with each passing second like a crawling, persisting parasite inside his mind. As he clutched his head with his hands, worried of him, Mikoto narrowed her brows at her panicking brother. Truth be told, she knew what was happening. After all, she could hear the old man as much as her older brother. Yet, she couldn't let the same worry wash over the other curious Genomes who did not hear the man but who were witnessing the amplifying madness on their savior angel. She tried to remain stoic, but it was so difficult…

"***I knew you were the perfect one. I knew you would succeed. I thank you, for helping me, for helping us, for saving Terra.***"

"Shut up, Garland!" Zidane whined out, his hands still trying to contain the intensifying hysteria that wanted to escape from him.

"***We had few sacrifices, but in the end, everything went well.***"

A thrilling, cold rush flowed through his veins, Zidane could feel it. The buildup was slow, but his rising madness started overtaking his mind. Protruding a low growl he could not suppress, he whispered, "… Kuja… Where's Kuja…?"

“***Kuja’s soul had returned to the fused crystal, wherein his memories will be kept, thanks to your action for saving the planet. His soul will be reborn anew eventually.***”

Memories. What to make of them when he could no longer experience his brother’s joy and sadness anymore?

“No… Garland…” Zidane said out low in despair, kneeling on his palms, breathing hard as sweat poured down. As he began to shake and his hands shifted to fists, his body started to give away a faint glow and his voice gained few octaves. “You’re dead… If Kuja’s dead too, then where the heck is Kuja?!”

“***Kuja’s no longer present.***”

“No… No!” the boy screamed louder, not even noticing that long pink, red and white fur had grown all over his skin and the claws of his fingers had come out and sharpened. “Where’s Kuja?! I can still hear you, so why can’t I hear him?!”

“***Death cannot speak for the deceased.***”

He sensed the rage getting out now. Baring his teeth, the instincts to kill everything on sight came back to him. “No! That’s unfair! That’s so fucking

unfair!” he hollered before his fur and hair bristled in extreme fury. The power of Trance coursing through, all he wanted was to murder and destroy things all over again.

His red, shining glare darted over his Genome kin that were now too close to him. Their newly given souls were the reasons he had lost everything. It was because of them that his hands were tied, that he had been manipulated like a puppet his entire life. His whole existence was a lie, a programmed code that made him up. Yet, he had the free will to get out of this programmed destiny.

A grin crept to his lips. He growled at them. He had never been so ready to start a carnage of his own free will.

Letting the instincts take over, he launched at them without warning, his daggers ready to kill some tailed creatures.

…

His daggers never reached their intended targets.

Instead, there was something painful that hit him suddenly, a pain he could not explain. As the rush of his Trance grew in intensity, an excruciating headache pumped beneath his skull like an

accelerating drum resounding inside. Unable to hold onto his weapons, he dropped them, and soon, he collapsed on the ground, where he stood on his knees and clutch to his head with a freaked whine. The pain inside his mind was struggling to think through the events.

But somehow, he could not think much.

There was another chaotic battle, a raging war occurring inside his mind as the pain and insanity became unbearable. Something from beneath was starting to vanish, and when he realized what, the fear of being alone suddenly felt pale compared to what was happening to him.

Within his declining mind, his memories began to disappear, completely.

It started with unimportant things of his life, then the disappearance spread faster, going after the more important memories.

Zidane did not understand why this was happening. His tears going wild, his madness raging, he jumped everywhere around, crying and stuttering nonsenses. He tried catching things aimlessly, but holding onto his memories was like trying to grip to

smoke with his bare hands. One by one, the important parts of his past life vanished fast.

He could not remember his time on Terra at all. He could not remember his childhood. He could not remember his adolescence. Soon, he could not remember the present.

And then, the people of his life disappeared.

Garland. Mahila. Garnet. K-Kuj…

"***No, please, not him…***"

"***Not him!***"

"NOT HIM!" he screamed, resounding his despair, rage and sorrow which pushed the other Genomes to take a step back, except for Mikoto. The third Angel of Death remained still, never moving away, gazing at her brother's descent to insanity.

A tear escaped from her eye.

Lowering her head with a visible guilt, she said, "I'm… sorry, Zidane."

That girl, she knew what was going on! She knew why he was suffering! Growling at her, Zidane snarled as he prepared to launch at her to give the pain she deserved! Until… Until…

… the image of a young man with long, silver hair flashed in his mind, a man he realized he used to know, but he could no longer put his hands on who.

“Ku… Ku…!” he cried to the young man’s image, confused and scared. He could not recall the complete name, and it angered him so much he wanted to kill things.

The image of the man vanished. Zidane was enraged but he was also overwhelmed by sadness, and he could not tell why.

And then, everything went black.

…

Mikoto found it hard to look back at her older brother the other Genomes stared at in shock as his mouth went agape, his body stood motionless and his eyes stayed opened wide. Seconds later, Zidane’s orbits rolled out behind before they were hidden by his shutting lids and his body followed the collapse. The Genomes were all observing as their savior dropped on the grass, falling to unconsciousness after Mikoto had knocked him out of his suffering.

The glow of Trance was swept away, leaving the slumbering Zidane back to his normal form. Mikoto

gazed at him for a minute and she shut her eyes with a guilty look as she slowly shook her head. The Genomes behind her were startled by the event, unaware of what and why this was happening. Quiet, they observed as their leader Mikoto grabbed her brother in her arms, holding him on his back and exposing him to her kin. With a shy smile, the young Genome girl looked up to her former soulless brothers and sisters.

“My siblings. This is your brother, Zidane,” she said and tilted her head, manifesting her regrets over her brother’s fate. “He and this decaying man, Kuja, were the ones who have saved your souls and our planet from vanishing to nothingness. It’s thanks to them and the combined efforts of our creator that we are revived. We’ll be thriving in this new world, a hybrid of Terra and Gaia.”

One of the little girl Genomes had a particularly concerned stare on the unconscious hero and the rigid corpse at their feet. Unsure of everything that had just happened and what they saw meant to her, she shivered out of fright. Like all ignorant fools, the unknown frightened her. “Why is the man with the white hair sleeping on the ground?” she asked shyly.

“This man, Kuja, is dead, not sleeping, meaning he’s no longer alive, unlike you and I,” Mikoto explained, trying to maintain her best smile to not scare the little girl.

“Oh,” the young girl hushed before lending her attention at the unconscious young man in Mikoto’s arms. Pointing at him, she asked, “What’s going to happen to him, then? Is he dead too?”

“Zidane is not dead,” Mikoto clarified, pursuing in with her smile, nevertheless. “Master Garland had programmed him as such that when he succeeds with his mission to fuse both planets to save us, his memories will be deleted so he can restart his life anew, just like you when you gained a soul. This is his reward for having saved his planet. Having the memories of his old life would bring him too much pain.”

Another Genome, this time a young man, stepped in. “How can memories bring pain? Memories are just lingering thoughts and they can’t hurt our body.”

Mikoto sighed. She realized teaching them everything she knew about life was going to be a little harder than she thought. She explained, “This is a different kind of pain. As you live up your new

lives and experience with your emotions, you will understand."

"I'm not sure to understand," one of the woman Genomes pondered.

"Me neither," another young man added.

"You will understand with time," Mikoto commented before returning her focus at her unconscious brother. "You've just all gained a soul and you will learn."

"Ohhh…" the Genomes said in unison like a choir.

However, the same little girl from before still had her sad gaze over their brother angel, their savior. She could not suppress that pout off her face. Overwhelmed by a grief she could not explain, she stated, "But I think memories are precious. I don't think it's right to take someone's memories away."

Soothed by the darkness and the comfort below him, he struggled to keep his eyes shut to continue with sweet dreams. Alas, even with the closed eyes, he saw the light through the thin skin of his lids.

When he woke up, the bright light blinded him, spurring him to panic.

Giving a short shriek of fear, he covered his eyes with his arms, the light causing a burning pain to his orbits. Tears blurred his vision, but these watery tears aided him soothe the fiery and dry effects on his eyes, helping him to appease down. Allowing his vision to sharpen and see his surrounding, he began to discover the world he awoke to.

His head hurt, and it was hard to think straight.

Clutching after his head with his hands, he tried thinking of something, but then, he realized that something was missing.

Actually, everything was missing.

Pulling the cover off him, he began to scrutinize each inch of his body, at least the parts he could see. He stared at his fingers, somehow enthralled by them, and he began moving each of his digits before he brushed them on his own face, inspecting each part of his facial features with the touch. He took a peek at the rest of his body, examining his self before he noticed something uncomfortable behind him.

It was a furred appendage, and for some reason, he did not recall how it was called.

Wait a minute.

He did not know who he was, what he was or why he even came to be.

The very thought of being here in the unknown scared him and he crouched himself back in his cover in a fetal position, shivering and feeling lonely. He was not certain where he was, what he knew and what to do. He was stuck alone in an unknown world, unaware of everything, unknown to everything. He did not know why he was here, why he was under the cover, why the light was so bright and painful. He was alone in the world of unknown and he was afraid.

He did not know why he was crying and whining nonsenses out of his mouth. He wanted answers, but he did not know where and how he will find them. He was confused, lost and sad.

“Hey, there.”

The young man yelped at the call. Nervous, he turned around and tried finding the source of the voice. He was surprised to find another person in this closed area by the opening of the wall, one he

recognized as a girl by the look of it. He stared at her, vacant eyes with fear turning into curiosity. Having suspicions of her intentions, he shielded himself with the cover as if the thing could protect him from harm. However, he was relieved when he noticed the girl also sported a furred appendage behind her back. Perhaps she was one of his kin.

“You… don’t remember who you are, am I right?”

With another intense glare, the young man did not react much to her voice, but he seemed to understand enough to know that he was being addressed, at least.

“That’s right. Master Garland had indeed forced a complete memory deletion if you were to succeed with your purpose,” the other one said, though the young man was unable to process anything. Thankfully, she did not appear dangerous to him. “There are two main reasons for this. First, it is to prevent you from causing a genocide to our race if you would come with an uncontrollable madness. Second, it is to free you of the pain of having lost everything, with no burden of your memories to haunt you. Even with your memory loss, you should have retained your basic motor, vital functions,

sentience and knowledge. However, from your body language and vacant look, I can see you have lost the comprehension of our language as well."

The girl sighed, exhausted. "I guess you're in a new state like when Kuja and I have gained awareness for the first time. We'll have to reteach you everything. This won't be easy, but I believe you'll learn fast."

When the girl stopped speaking, the boy stared down, nervous that he could not understand a word she had said. He blinked few times, trying to focus and remember her words as they sounded important. He could have heard the different intonations in her voice and seen the diverse emotions in her expression, but these meant nothing to him, yet.

"We can start with names!" The girl pointed her fingers at her, her smile shining the boy's life as he sensed relief and warmth from that new facial expression. Somehow, it gave him some happiness, too. "I'm your sister, Mikoto."

The boy blinked at her, life filling his eyes again. "Mi… koto?" he repeated, unsure if he said it correct. His instincts told him she should be addressed by that special word.

“Yes,” she continued. It felt like talking to a toddler speaking for the first time, though in this blank state, this boy truly was a toddler in the body of a young man. She pointed at him this time. “You might have lost your identity, but I will try my best to bring you back to who you were. Your name is Zidane.”

“Z-Zidane…” the boy said after her and his smile had gotten wider at this special word. He was unable to tell why, but he knew the word was very important to him, that it will follow him the rest of his life.

…

I’m so sorry, Zidane. You might be a hero in this new page of Terra’s history, but too much blood had been shed by you and our brother. You are an enemy to Gaia, and thus we have to hide you here and seal your memories. Still, I hope that giving you a second chance will allow you to experience the normal life that you had coveted with Kuja, except you’ll have to live without him. No one will ever monitor you. You will have no given purpose. You will be a free man, just like any other life on Gaia and Terra.

I hope that you will live in peace with your kin, and that together, we will start a new Terran

civilization among the remaining Gaians as a peaceful community. This was the true dream of our creator despite his twisted ways.

With your past forgotten and your Angel of Death designation no longer standing, Terra will restart anew with Gaia and a new Zidane.

It's your reward, Zidane. Thank you.

The End

***Author's note**: I'd say this is the "canon" ending of this fanfic since it's an extension of the Prologue. And yeah, it's very depressing (and kind of fucked up, to be honest). I thought that if Garland had no care nor affinity with his creations as long as his goals are reached, then he'd probably have no problem screwing Zidane's mind forever in this fic. I mean, his intentions were made clear in-game that he intended to take Kuja's soul away when he'll succeed with the planets' fusion AND he tried to take Zidane's soul away because he refused to serve him.*

Of course, more alternate endings to come. I wanted to write more of this ending, but I'll just

leave the ending open. Could be Zidane gains the same happy-go-lucky personality we know from the game, or maybe something grimmer happens, like Dagger thinks of him dead but finds him while visiting Mikoto in the Black Mages village. And then, stuff happens (the later idea was the one I wanted to explore, but I decided not to…).

Ending 2: Switch

Depressing ending again? Or is it happier? Also, warning, super OOC character ahead.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Ending 2: Switch

He did not understand why he could see again, unless this was what returning to the planet's crystal felt like.

Yet, something was off. His vision was in a strange fog, but he distinguished the light, the darkness, the blurred shapes and colors. Grasping that he had just reawakened into this world, then perhaps he should allow some times for his sight to gain its former sharpness.

Wait a minute.

If he was part of the planet, then why was he moving and even breathing like a living thing?

No, this was not right. He was supposed to be dead. His soul was to return to the crystal where his

memories should strengthen and nourish it, and he should be reborn anew with no memories of his past. Yet, he remembered everything, or, at least, most of things.

And suddenly, he saw clear again. The world around revealed to him, where giant roots zigzagged into chaotic twists, with the sunrays piercing through the little holes the roots did not cover. The pure, yet cold air flowed through his stained clothes, skin and hair, offering him frozen shivers.

Even with his strength coming back to him, he still couldn’t take the will to get up from his lying pose. It did not help that someone was slumbering over his chest. He provided him enough of his body warmth to prevent him from falling ill to the cold. The one over him breathed in slow and peaceful movements, but his skin stained of dry blood and trace of injuries were filled with goosebumps all over. The poor thing must be freezing.

“Z-Zidane?” Kuja called his sleeping brother, caught by surprise to see him. This situation confused him. Kuja plainly remembered having become blind during that unfair battle on Terra. And then the worse had followed with his entire body and all his senses failing him one by one until the

ultimate demise had come to claim his life. While he did not remember much of the actual time of reaching death, he did remember “losing consciousness” after saying his unofficial goodbyes to his little brother. It must have been what death was.

Stirred by Kuja’s voice, Zidane began to budge but he remained in slumber. The poor boy did not seem to realize that he had been sleeping on the “dead” body of his elder sibling, with his head lying on Kuja’s shoulder and Zidane’s own arms and tail curled around the elder’s body.

Yet, they both appeared too exhausted and even lazy to move and look at each other. While Zidane maintained his initial pose, Kuja looked up to the near hidden sky above and stayed still, unsure why he was still thriving and why he had recovered from his injuries and death. However, he should not complain, even if he had no explanation to this strange event. Who had granted him this second chance?

Well, he should enjoy this second chance to spend some times with poor Zidane who must have been devastated.

“How… How am I still alive?” Kuja whispered as he tried moving the arm from the shoulder which Zidane’s head lied on. How silly to feel all the numbness because his brother had been sleeping on his arm for so long, blocking his veins. Kuja’s moves prompted Zidane’s slow awakening where he opened his eyes. Too lazy to turn his head to give his younger sibling a good look, Kuja felt calmer by giving few soft strokes on Zidane’s hair with his now freed hand and he gently smiled.

“Zidane, I’m so glad you’re okay,” the elder brother continued, his voice having gained some octave thanks to his growing strength. However, his worries came to him again when he noticed the gravity of the bruises and wounds on the younger one’s arms.

“You’re injured,” Kuja commented with a concerned look. Without further ado, he attempted to cast some Cure magic but he discovered that he couldn’t use any magic, just like during his battle on Terra. Perhaps he was only given back enough strength to move, but not cast any magic yet. “Please, tell me you’re okay…”

While Zidane appeared weaker, he did not seem near death or afflicted with anything that will

threaten his life, for now. Perhaps all his emotional outbursts of thinking of Kuja dead drained him to the core. The poor young boy struggled to speak back. “You’re… You’re okay,” he responded, his tone weaker than anything Kuja knew of him, but then, like him, Zidane had just woken up… The curse of oversleeping must have affected him as much as Kuja.

Kuja huffed a chuckle at Zidane’s response. “Yes, yes, I am now, but…” He sighed, uncertain if Zidane will like his announcement. “I seem to have lost my magic, for now. I feel reinvigorated, but… I don’t know…”

Despite the bad news, the younger sibling appeared too tired to add another word or exhibit a proper reaction. Even his heartbeats and his breathing remained slow, not ever changing with Kuja’s words. Poor Zidane. Kuja could not tell exactly what had occurred after his “death” and before his “awakening”, but he was certain of something. Zidane had been engaged into a ruthless battle during his death, and he must have fought tooth and nail to protect his big brother from any kind of harm.

After all, this had always been Zidane’s ways.

After the silence that lasted some minutes, Kuja coveted more of his brother. Giving him few more strokes on his hair, Kuja hushed, “We’re both alive… I still don’t know how, but we’re living… Garland must have been wrong about my impending and upcoming death, I guess…”

“No, Master Garland was right.”

Zidane’s weak response was followed by a short silence. When Zidane stayed unmoved by it, this brought an alarming shiver running across Kuja’s skin. His orbit broadened, mouth agape, Kuja was struck with a sudden heartbreaking experience. The feeling was so terrifying that he had instinctively got himself away from his brother’s grip and let the younger boy dropped to the roots, keeping some distance between them. As a panicked Kuja tried standing back, Zidane struggled to rise and he managed to sit, a feat that appeared impossible for someone so weary.

It was only then Kuja discovered that something was amiss as soon as he gave his sibling a careful gaze, straight to the other’s turquoise eyes.

Zidane’s usually lively eyes were devoid of life.

“Z-Zidane…?” Kuja called him, afraid to hear a response. He didn’t know what had happened to Zidane, but while he was terrified to know, he still had to know. He had no choice but to deal with whatever revelation he was going to be given.

When Zidane stared back into Kuja’s eyes, the elder broke into a sudden choke. From now on, he had a hunch of what had occurred.

Yet, he wanted to believe that he was wrong about it.

“Master Garland had programmed you to die at your twenty-fourth year, approximatively.”

Zidane’s voice was as hollow and devoid of emotions as his blank stare. Kuja did not believe it but he desperately needed answers.

“W-What…?” the older brother stuttered, trying to find his words and his heart pumping faster with the worry of hearing Zidane confirming his fear. “W-Why… are you calling Garland ‘Master’? Why… didn’t I die as I was p-programmed to?!”

His heart sank when he got his answer.

“I have granted you with my soul so you live again.”

No… Please no… Why?

This wasn’t right… This was a nightmare! How did Zidane even achieve this? And yet…

No, that could not be it, right? But, it was only a fictional tale…

Right, eight years ago, when Zidane had found that secret room with full of old Terran books in the Desert Palace…

…

Hey, Zidane, what are you reading?

Oh, Kuja? I dunno.

Can I take a look?

Okay.

‘The magic of a soul’. Wait a minute, this book is huge! It’s a novel for bigger people!

Yes, but it have many drawings!

Are you implying that you are only looking at pictures?

No! I read story too!

Really? Then tell me, what is the story about?

Hmm, story about girl going on adventure. Girl gets killed, and daddy sad. So, the daddy gives soul to girl so she revives and doesn't stay dead, but daddy becomes all weird and stuff. He can't love again.

What? This is no children's tale! It's a tragic story!

But Kuja! What if you die too? I can give my soul to you too?

Stop saying that I will die. I will not die, that I can assure you.

But you say Genomes can eat souls to do things!

Not eat, Zidane. Absorbing souls to create wonders is the better term.

…

Wonders… as to revive someone they loved…?

No, that event, eight years ago… That silly memory had been sealed in the depth of his mind for so long, only to resurface now to reveal how this dumb event had shifted into a much bigger nightmare. That tale of one giving his soul to save a daughter's life used to be what it was to Kuja; a mere tragic fictional tale. Intriguing stories with

bittersweet endings, where one found their light at the end of the tunnel after a noble sacrifice, just as Zidane had coveted in his own tale.

After learning of the Genomes' ability as artificial vessels to welcome souls, Kuja could not tell how, but Zidane must have discovered a way to make sure he was about to resign to his precious soul to see his loved one shine in this world after losing everything. The boy was not afraid of his own death, but worse, he was not afraid to lose his core and individuality to see Kuja live again.

A sacrifice worthy of the most courageous Genome to ever stand on this planet, even if he knew what was to come out of it. Zidane must have known the empty husk he'll leave behind will no longer have any care for any siblings, and especially not his caregiver.

"Z… Zidane…" Kuja's tone dropped to despair as his throat began to form uncontrollable hiccups. Tears ran down his orbits and he went to gently catch his brother's cheeks, giving him soft strokes. "No… Don't tell me… that you did this… to save me…"

Yet, Zidane was not flinching at Kuja's despair. His hollow stare manifested no sign of life.

“With my soul within you, you do not retain my former personality and memories, but you will live as long as Master Garland had programmed me to live. As I do not possess a soul anymore, if I am not to encounter physical death, I have attained eternal life like our Genome brethren.”

Unable to stop the sniffling from his nose and the tears from escaping his eyes, Kuja rubbed his wet eyes with his hand and winced as more hiccups came out of his mouth. He could not stop his breathing from being continuously interrupted by the hiccups. With all these emotions afflicting him, he came with an alarming realization.

Having his brother’s soul inside him provided him with the emotions Zidane had been cursed with through his life.

It was so strange to experience such emotions, but it hurt so much… How could Kuja have never understood his brother’s emotions until now? Was this why Garland had deemed Zidane as the perfect Genome?

“N-No…” the elder sibling fought to speak between his aching hiccups. “D-Did you b-become… an empty v-vessel?”

Looking back at Zidane as he still showed no sign of reaction other than giving a formal answer was becoming too unbearable for Kuja. He could avoid his stare, but he could not feign to listen to his every word. “Yes, because I am a Genome. I am an empty vessel.”

Kuja could not look at him, but he could not help himself to get closer to his little brother and wrapped him into a warming hug like his love for his family will somehow bring his soul back. “Z-Zidane… Oh, Zidane… Why d-did you do t-this…? You didn’t n-need to…”

“I have granted you with my soul so you live again.”

How could Zidane parrot the very same words as earlier with the exact same pattern and intonation? Only a soulless machine would utter such things. Kuja’s whines were stronger and louder, but he continued to caress his brother’s hair. “You… You shouldn’t have… You shouldn’t have… Giving y-your soul… is death itself… and maybe worse… You’re… d-dead, Zidane…”

“No, I am not dead. I am alive.”

Such literal words with no meaning to one with a soul… “B-But… not having a s-soul… is worse than d-death…”

If having a hollow shell that used to host his brother’s soul as a companion was going to make up the rest of his existence, Kuja was unsure what the future will hold for them. The life he had led when he first came to be from that laboratory basement in Bran Bal was bare, boring and sad. Zidane’s very existence had become the core of his life since his birth, with that little thing bringing him excitement and smiles along this sadness and sorrow. Having a brother and a friend was all that was to Kuja’s days. He’d been so scared to lose him that he spent his whole life keeping Zidane out of everyone’s reach as he was the only one able to fill his loneliness in life.

Without Zidane, Kuja did not know if he will ever find the resolve to live on.

Images of the pleasant, old memories flashed at him.

…

Baby Zidane touching Kuja’s face and laughing.

Toddler Zidane shouting “Kuja” for the first time as his first word.

Adventurous child Zidane exploring the unknown of Gaia with Kuja.

… Leaving child Zidane on the Invincible teleporter with the hope to save himself from the boy… and then save him from Garland.

Playful child Zidane playing fight with their growing Silver Dragon Mahila.

Bahamut fighting the tiny Zidane who had no chance to survive it, but the boy still tried everything to fight the invincible legend.

Another playful child Zidane, winning his first game of Tetra Master.

Crying child Zidane, fearing for Kuja's death in their mansion in Treno.

Another crying child Zidane at the King's funeral, fearing Garnet's Eidolons that might kill Kuja.

Young teen Zidane, hopelessly haunted by a distant love with Garnet.

Newly young adult Zidane, feeling betrayed by his love.

Master Garland taking over Zidane's soul… a sight of nightmare…

…

All these important marking points of the growing child gave him the sad realization how Zidane's life went, how the poor boy had been manipulated through his life for both Garland and Kuja's own benefits. As Zidane grew and gained life experience, the unhappier he was.

Guilt hit Kuja even harder.

And despite having his chance to live on without the old man who held their lives, without his older brother to manipulate his environment to his will, Zidane still had chosen to surrender everything to see Kuja live on. Zidane knew Kuja was manipulating everything, but the boy had forgiven him. The love for his brother was truer than anything he'd known.

If only… he hadn't manipulated Zidane too… He would have his second chance right now…

As Kuja drifted back to a slow sleep, he gave Zidane a last gaze. The empty shell looked back at him, his vacant stare never showing any sign of life nor that he said another word. Vessels did not speak unless they needed to.

“Kuja?”

The call of his name moved him away from another slumber. The Genome opened his eyes, only to find out the bright, blinding blue light above burning his orbits into an aching pain. For an instant, he quickly covered his lids from the blinding light and he collapsed to his knees, trying to get hold of himself. His panic intensified until he felt the touch on his cheeks by warm but wet tiny hands. When his eyes found relief, he gently opened them. Before him, a pleasant surprise faced him.

Little Zidane stood here, his wide eyes full of life glinting with the joy of his glorious childhood years. However, Zidane’s small hands were dripping with warm blood, blood that wasn’t his, thankfully. The wet feeling on his cheeks earlier were certainly that blood, and when he touched his cheeks with his fingers, he could see the same crimson fluid across his hand.

From the genuine joy plastered on the child’s face, Kuja knew that somehow, despite the blood everywhere, Zidane had no evil intention. Instead, as he looked behind the little boy’s shoulders, he saw the fresh corpse of a monster, one of these familiar,

demonic feline creatures wandering in their home in the desert; a Torama, to be precise.

Just as he'd do each time, Zidane was showing off his kill to Kuja with that wide, silly grin on his face implying the pride from his feat and the congratulations he coveted from his big brother. "Kuja!" the young child called again, this time making sure Kuja heard him well enough to draw his full attention on him. "I kill monster! I'm good now! I fight good!"

The familiar broken language of his younger sibling brought a smile to him and even some serenity. How he had missed listening to Zidane's constant childish blabbering, even if he'd call him a brat for this.

Yet, for a reason unknown to him, only now he grasped at the several injuries the boy seemed to have sustained from his fight. The relief and joy left the elder fast.

"Zidane, you're hurt!" Kuja lost no time and casted a Curaga spell on his brother. As the magic flowed through Zidane, the boy's excitement seemed to stop for a moment before he grinned like a silly dog again. The poor child must have sustained these wounds from that Torama fight.

As the inflicted injuries began to heal and close, Zidane's enthusiasm came back and he bounced backward, fleeing from Kuja's clutch and standing beside the dead beast. He waited for his older brother to congratulate him, Kuja could tell this.

But this event felt too bizarre. They were bathed under the blue light, a light Kuja recognized too much, from a place which appeared to be their home planet, Terra. Yet, Toramas were found on Gaia in the Desert Palace. Asides from Garland's creations and the Moogles, nothing alive were found on Terra.

"Zidane, where did you find that Torama?" the puzzled man asked.

The boy shrugged. He said, "I dunno. I find, I kill. I'm good, huh?"

This was getting more disturbing. "But Toramas are only found on Gaia…"

Startled by his brother's comment, Zidane blinked at him. "What?"

Giving the above a solemn gaze but avoiding a direct glare at the burning light, he clarified, "That blue light means we're on Terra. This can't be real, Zidane… How can you explain this?"

When Kuja looked back at his brother, another strange event played before him. Zidane was still there with the same pride and grin stuck on his face, but oddly enough, he had aged by several years, now bearing the appearance of his young adult self.

Nevermind that Torama monster that Zidane had preyed upon earlier. On his bloodied arms, a young woman lied inert, bearing so many deep cuts and stabs across her body and face, her attire stained with crimson at whole and her entire appearance mutilated. Even as an Angel of Death, this sight of death gave Kuja a scare to himself as he grasped at the murdered woman's identity in his brother's arms.

Princess Garnet.

"Do you see it, Kuja?" Zidane exclaimed, still coveting his sibling's praise when his grin spread wider. "I did it! I murdered her!"

This was too much for Kuja to handle all these odd events at once. What happened to Zidane? Why was everything so out of order and out of this world?

"Why did you… kill her?" Kuja asked, taking a step forward, nowhere wanting to admit that he was scared of his own brother's insanity. Yet, nothing

was strange to the younger boy. Zidane took a step closer to Kuja, holding out the near unrecognizable corpse of the princess to him, his smile still.

“I’ve finally conquered it!” Zidane uttered.

Sweat began to pour down on Kuja’s skin. The man wanted an answer, but he was afraid of the answer he will get. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve gotten rid of one of my biggest obstacles to your goals, Kuja! Garnet kept forcing my love and my emotions with her presence, so I murdered her! She won’t bother me anymore! My emotions and my souls are keeping you from reaching your goals to rule the worlds!”

Kuja’s brows narrowed with a frightful concern. “W-What?”

Garnet’s body vanished from Zidane’s hands, and the young boy appeared happier than ever. “Because they’re obstacles to your goals, I’m going to give up my soul! You need it more than I do! That way, you’ll rule both worlds by yourself!”

No, all this was so wrong…

“You’re kidding, right?” Kuja inquired, but this did not stop Zidane from prolonging his proud

smile.

“Just stand here! I’ll transfer my soul to you now!”

“NO!” Kuja begged when he was suddenly waved over by a surging panic and sadness. When the tears ran down and his stutters came back, he pled his brother to stop this madness. Dropping to his knees, Kuja could not bear to look at Zidane again. “Please, Zidane, don’t do this! I no longer care about ruling the worlds! My only true wish was for us to be freed from him, from Garland!”

But the silence that followed implied a bad omen. When Kuja looked up…

His smile gone, Zidane’s eyes were devoid of life.

…

He woke up.

The heart pumping hard against his ribs and his clothes drenched of his own sweat, Kuja was brought back to reality with a pain deep in his chest. His lungs gasping for air, he found himself taking heavy breath like he was searching for relief in the air to soothe his pained body and mind. These were

the repercussion of the nightmare he had just escaped from.

What kind of strange dream was that? Nothing was making sense, and yet, the nightmare had struck him so hard his tears were still streaming down his orbits. What a dumb and silly move for Zidane to give up his soul like that when there was no need for it. What was the point of transferring his soul just for Kuja to achieve his goals, when there no longer were any goals left? Master Garland was as dead as a log and Kuja was thriving with so much healthy energy he felt like he wanted to explore the whole Gaia on an adventure.

No… Wait a minute…

What was he doing here, on the roots of… the Iifa Tree? Why was it so dark in here? Why were more roots hiding the sky from him?

Then it clicked.

He looked around. Straight behind him, he made a sad discovery. There, a young boy slumped on the roots without thinking. His only visible movements were the slow blinking of his blank eyes, the flowing of his hair and fur of his tail and the

sluggish brushing of his appendage left and right as if it moved by itself from the instinct.

Or perhaps the furred appendage was the only thing left with some will and strength in his body…

Unable to contain the shivers of his own body, Kuja struggled to stand back. He found it hard to look at his little brother again, the empty shell devoid of feelings and experiences, but deep inside, Kuja knew the boy needed the warmth. With a serene calm, Kuja crawled himself to Zidane to gaze into his brother's vacant stare barren of a soul. Kuja could no longer deny that Zidane was the vessel all of their brethren were.

But even an empty vessel could suffer physical pain. Garland had created Genomes to be able to sustain themselves, but they could not tend to their own injuries unless they were ordered to. After all, hailing from a planet where there was no danger to worry about, Genomes did not need to tend to their wounds. The same applied to Zidane, except that they definitely were no longer on their safe home planet. The poor boy was still afflicted with numerous injuries on his body, and without any healing option soon, he might get a worsening infection and a further deteriorating physique.

This was now or never. With so much energy within, there must be somewhere where his magic had been sealed or something! He had to cast a healing spell on him! Focusing on his soul, Kuja began an incantation, but even a simple Cure spell will not come out of his hands. Like Garland's programmed death had sapped all his spiritual powers, Kuja had no choice but to admit his magic was truly gone.

His nightmare was his new reality.

Zidane no longer had his soul. Now, to make it worse, if nothing was done, he will die in a long and painful death. Even if he was a simple shell, Zidane was still the boy he had watched growing for sixteen years. He was his dear family.

This was it. Kuja will not simply stay here and cry for his brother's fate. He had to get him out of here alive.

There were no words for this. He could not tell why, but he felt a sudden rush of energy like he could jump and run around like he had never done before. Even his tail experienced the energetic blitz of strength that might give him the silly, yet convenient ability of hanging by his appendage like a monkey. Perhaps it was that "soul transfer" thing

which Zidane had spoken about. Kuja must have gained his brother's athletic strength somehow, which might be why he could no longer cast any magic. Without losing any more time, he forced Zidane to hold onto him by the neck and shoulders so he could hang to him. Thankfully, Zidane seemed to possess enough energy to proceed with this task. With the younger boy firmly hooked to his elder sibling, Kuja began to climb toward the sky, where he observed the sunrise through all these giant roots.

Such strength… Kuja felt like he could achieve anything. Was this truly Zidane's own stamina? No wonder the boy had been filled with confidence all his time, even during his life and death moments… After half of an hour, Kuja surprised himself when he already reached the sky open, where he was given the privilege to contemplate the high sun in the horizon and the strange surrounding that seemed off from what he knew of Gaia.

Of course, he recognized the familiar Iifa Tree and its surrounding area, with the residual Mist floating around. However, on the lower horizon, some tall mushroom-like structures stood erect, giving the barren land an alien feeling. Their blue hue was like something out of a dream, yet these

were all too common for a Genome coming from another world planet.

These were the structures from Terra.

Wait, how was this possible? With the Iifa Tree behind him, seeing these Terran structures should be impossible on Gaia. How could both worlds be merged together as one world?

What if… What if Garland's predictions for the crystals' fusion had actually happened during his "death"?

However, when he felt his shoulders lighter and he heard something drop to the ground behind him in a thud sound, Kuja realized he had no time to ponder with these senseless questions. He needed to focus on something far more worrisome when he turned around to see Zidane collapsed on the dusty ground, nearly fainted and weakening by the minutes. His strength leaving him, he could've no longer hold onto his brother's neck. His body was overwhelmed with pain, but as an empty vessel, the boy could not manifest his suffering.

Fighting to keep his panic under control, Kuja grabbed Zidane in his arms and ran ahead, farther away from the giant tree to find the nearest shelter.

His empty life was leaving slowly, and if nothing was done, Kuja might lose him forever.

When the elder brother found a clear crystal water pond outside of the roots area, he was welcomed by a rather gruesome scene from a most horrific nightmare, the image of death and destruction suggesting a violent war earlier.

From afar, he saw hundreds of destroyed airships and thousands of bloodied and burnt corpses on the soil.

Did Zidane… do this? How did he even achieve this? Was this truly what he was capable of when in… Trance? Was this what Garland had predicted upon Kuja's "death"?

He'll ask about this later. For now, the least Kuja could do was to offer Zidane proper care by starting to offer him pure water down his throat. The poor young man visibly suffered from the lack of sustenance. When the boy drank enough water, Kuja removed the boy's cloth to give him a proper bath, hopeful this will help to clean the worsening infections.

Cleaning the injuries and giving water to a thirsty soulless Genome seemed to have granted him a

spark of life, but not enough to fill him with a proper soul. At least, Zidane might survive this. This was more than enough, considering the situation…

Trying to keep himself calm in this time of need, Kuja gave in to some softer crying and whining. Warm tears in his eyes, he came to give Zidane a long hug, hoping this will offer him enough warmth to revive his lost soul, or even give his soul back. This was a silly and dumb move, but at this point, Kuja would try anything, as absurd as it looked. Such a strange reaction, worthy of a stupid, yet perfect Angel of Death, as Garland had put it.

Yes, this might be something Zidane himself would have done, if the roles were reversed, if he still had his soul.

Knowing this stupid move was all the consequences of bearing his brother's soul brought himself into another weeping session.

Look, there's someone over there!

The faraway voice had taken Kuja by surprise.

So much he hadn't realized he had been sleeping in the middle of nowhere near the pond, with Zidane

slumbering by his side. At last, the boy had found relief with the drinking water and his cleaner wounds, making his sleep rather deep. Taking his attention away from him, Kuja looked around, trying to spot where the voice came from or at least see if he could recognize it. Unfortunately for him, the voice was unfamiliar and he did not know anyone that could match it. Perhaps this was one of the remaining Gaians searching for survivors in this chaotic hecatomb of this killing field, where the rotting death stank in the air. Having taken a guess of what Zidane was capable of during his Trance rage, Kuja doubt he'd find any Gaian survivors.

Unless the survivors were not Gaian.

Soon, his ears spotted the sounds of steps behind him. From the numerous, unsynchronized steps, Kuja took a guess there were more than one person walking to his direction. From the slow pace and quiet steps, this suggested they were not hostile people either. He turned around, only to be shocked by the image he faced.

Mere meters away from him, a group of his own kin walked, trotting after him with shy steps, with a more familiar face leading the group ahead. When Kuja took notice of her presence, he frowned.

“Mikoto,” Kuja whispered with his gaze stuck at her, remembering the name of the one he might as well call his little sister, the infamous third *Angel of Death* who might have been created to replace both Kuja and Zidane if they were to fail.

At first, he could not tell why there was something strange among the other Genomes present with Mikoto. However, as they walked closer to him, he grasped why.

The Genomes’ eyes were filled with life.

“Kuja, Zidane, we have found you, at last,” Mikoto hushed to them and crouched to her brothers’ level. Strangely, her voice did not sound as lively as the man who had shouted before, who Kuja assumed was one of their Genome brethren behind her. Except for her lively eyes, it had been so hard for the silver-haired man to picture that young girl as one provided with a soul. Perhaps that attitude of hers was to hide her emotional weakness so she might exhibit herself as an Angel of Death.

But from the feeble smile she manifested and her shining eyes, Kuja assumed Mikoto might simply be a shy girl used to live around soulless siblings.

The young girl gave her brothers a careful examination before she went closer to Zidane whose injuries lingered on his body. Using her two palms, she started to chant an incantation which Kuja recognized as a Curaga spell. It seemed she had been created with both physical strength and spiritual power potential, certainly the balance of magic and physical attack from Garland's first two angels. Thanks to her curative magic spell, as the wounds on his body began to leave his bare skin, Zidane's eyes appeared to lose exhaustion and regain more strength. Unfortunately, this was not enough to bring him any kind of soul. He still was an empty shell, but at least, he seemed recovered, thanks goodness.

Satisfied that both her brothers were restored to their full health, she offered them a gentle smile and said, "Zidane will be fine, now."

The short joy to see Zidane recovered withered. When he thought to have moved on to his next life already, Kuja suddenly sensed some tears struggling to get away from his orbits. Keeping his stutters under control, Kuja affirmed, "No, Zidane is dead."

"No, he will survive," Mikoto objected, taken aback by Kuja's comment.

As to conceal the wailing that tried to come out, Kuja huffed a long sigh with his eyes darted to the ground. “He no longer has his soul. He has provided me with his soul to allow me life without my consent. We might as well call him dead.”

With a perceptible gulp, Mikoto did not believe Kuja until she gave another inspection into Zidane’s eyes. The emptiness of his orbits brought her some shock. What Kuja had told her was more than right. She recognized these familiar, blank eyes she had been so used with through her life surrounded by empty vessels. How did Zidane even achieve this? This was the first time she heard of such feat… Having known Zidane through their connected minds and having listening to her brothers from Terra, she knew the young boy would be ready to sacrifice his very core to see his loved one live. Besides, Garland had no care that his perfect creation was to die in the most painful, cruel way or lose his soul and his mind. The only thing that mattered to their master was that the fusion took place, which occurred. Everything afterward was of no importance.

Knowing about Kuja’s impending death, Mikoto realized this soul transfer was inevitable.

“I see,” Mikoto gulped at her words as if guilty of having tried to argue against Kuja about Zidane’s unfortunate fate. “So, he has given up his soul. Poor Zidane.”

Kuja’s sudden outburst at her word amplified Mikoto’s guilt. The elder brother grabbed the soulless boy by the back of his neck and shoulders, hugging him into an embrace and brushing his cheeks with his hand. Along his bawls, Kuja tried to speak. “I-I would rather die… t-than seeing him l-like this… M-My little b-brother…”

He stared back at the other Genomes who could do nothing but watch him cry. All of them stood there, not moving but looking at each other in confusion, unsure what they should do with the crying silver-haired Genome. After all, none of them had ever experienced sadness, yet.

“You all!” Kuja shouted at them, trying to stop the whine from coming out. “You m-must have… gained a soul, I-I can tell by the l-look in your eyes… Then…” He paused, hugging Zidane tighter now and his tone strengthening. “W-Why? Why couldn’t Zidane get one too?!”

Contemplating the sky in silence, Mikoto gave the sun an apologetic gaze. With a serene calm, she

explained, “Our kin… gained souls when Zidane’s rage brought enough death toll on Gaia.”

Kuja had been right. Zidane had truly caused this death field around the Iifa Tree. “Please, go on,” he told the Genome girl, wanting a further explanation, and Mikoto complied.

“The Gaian army was unable to defeat him in his Trance. I was to stop him from doing any damage, but unfortunately, I cannot stop him during his Trance. I have warned the Gaians to turn away, but they wouldn’t listen to me. After some while, realizing they could not win against him, the few survivors fled, leaving an injured Zidane alone. With enough death on this planet, Gaia’s crystal weakened enough to allow Terra’s crystal to fusion with it, thus creating a hybrid of both planets. Thankfully, the remaining Gaians still live on. We are on the new Terra, with both Gaians and Terrans living together. The Gaians probably resent us for this, but… we can only hope that after few generations, we will live all together in harmony and peace.”

Listening to Mikoto brought relief to the young man, but he couldn’t prevent more tears from escaping. “So… Garland’s predictions with Zidane… have been right,” Kuja said, giving a sad

glare at his little brother and giving him another stroke on the cheek. “But… I don’t know… Zidane’s gone now… Did Garland predict this… too, his soul transfer?”

Mikoto continued, “Terra has successfully assimilated Gaia. Actually, I should not say assimilate, but rather, both planets form one planet now. Our Genome kin has started to welcome the Terran souls in stasis after the fusion. The remaining souls returned to the normal cycle of souls with the other Gaian souls. As to why Zidane has not gained one… I can only assume that he actually gave up his soul after the fusion, so it was too late for him. He could not gain another soul in time, but even if he did, he might not be the same Zidane you used to know. With another soul, he could be a completely different individual.”

This was true, after all. Each soul was different like each person had their own individuality. This had been one of the first things Garland had ever taught him, which was also the reason he gave Kuja a specific soul in the first place. Even right now, with Zidane’s soul in him, he might have not gained his little brother’s personality or his memories, but he experienced the strange silly quirks and emotional outbursts just like Zidane. If Zidane got

hold of another soul, the chances to see his old personality back was a matter of one chance in few millions, since each soul was unique.

“Mikoto…” Kuja turned to the young girl, nearly coveting her warmth now that the only real one who used to love him was gone, his body never ceasing to tremble with a fear to be alone.

Despite her emotionless allure, Mikoto had a soul. She kneeled before him, holding his wet cheeks and she gave them a gentle brush with her small thumbs. “Kuja, please don’t cry,” she said, her voice softening to his sadness. Kuja darted his mournful gaze to hers, the look on Mikoto soothing him. “If we give Zidane some time, if we surround him with lively, soulful people, I believe he will eventually forge a soul on his own, just like the Black Mages you have created.”

The hiccups stopped. At this point, the only things he could hold onto were words of relief. His eyes filled with a sudden hope, he waited for Mikoto to say more. “Didn’t you notice, Kuja? You don’t have Zidane’s own memories in you. There’s a reason for this. This is because, even as an empty vessel, Zidane still holds his entire life memories. He has retained his childhood, his way to adulthood,

the ones he hated and the ones he loves. He knows you are his caregiver. Even if Master Garland might have predicted that love between you two, nothing will change the fact that Zidane dearly loved you, and he still probably loves you now. You still are his only big brother to him, Kuja."

When there was darkness, there was light somewhere, and that light was the hope Kuja needed in his life. The tears and hiccups intensified, but this time, they were warm and filled with joy. He could not stop sniffling, but he did not care anymore. These were no sad tears. He had a new hope to hang on to, and Kuja had never felt as happy than this. "A-Are you certain of this?" he exclaimed, his eyes shining with optimism.

Hopeful, Mikoto laid her hands on Kuja's shoulders. "Only time will tell, but…" She took a pause and a long breath before she warmly smiled at him again. "… I really hope we will see the true Zidane again. I've always wanted… two older brothers."

The End

***Author's note**: Like many fanfics where people were sad to see Kuja "dies" in the game, I had to make an alternate ending where he actually survives for some reason. I know Kuja's dream makes no sense, but my own dreams never make sense either, so I got inspired by myself. Dumb, I know.*

Leaving the ending open too, because, yeah.

Ending 3: Miscalculation

Okay, happier ending?

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Ending 3: Miscalculation

His deep sleep had been broken by a bright light blinding him. The burning sensation to the eyes was manifested by a long moan of pain and exhaustion before the instincts pushed him to rub his orbits with his hands. The constant rub somehow brought relief, but the persistent ache remained. Along his whines and heavy breathing, with his eyes shut, he listened to the surrounding miscellaneous voices, but he was unable to make out their words.

As he got used to the light, he gazed up, blinking at the strange, yet familiar décor above him. Painted to his vision, a roof made of woods and dried straws protected him from the outside… along with few others people standing around, looking at him with curious glares.

Shocked by their presence, he turned his head around to discover several… Black Mages and… lot

of copies of himself?

Wait a minute. Where was he? What was he doing here?

He had no time to think. Losing no more time, he launched himself from the bed where he had found slumber, his old instincts kicking in and forced him to adopt his defensive stance before he hissed at them. The Black Mages yelped in fear and they forced their way out of the hut they were under, though the copies of himself stood there, clueless and confused by his sudden reaction.

“Zidane, it’s good to see you awake.”

The soft call of his name appeased him and brought him a realization that he had been acting dumb by scaring the mages away. Zidane scouted around to check among his clones, all these blond and tailed individuals glaring at him with an unhealthy interest before his eyes darted to one girl appearing slightly different from the others. That young girl… He had barely gotten the time to get a good look at her before, but thankfully, he had been attentive enough during his recent trip to Terra to remember the one he had called a sister by accident, once.

“Mikoto…” Zidane called the girl. From her calm demeanor, he decided it was wiser to sit back on his bed and stay here, waiting for the girl to speak more.

“Hello, Zidane,” Mikoto greeted back, her lips forming a shy smile.

Confused by his awakening in this hut and the presence of his clones he recognized as his Genome kin, Zidane turned around again, trying to figure out how he had been shoved in this place during his unconsciousness. How did he even get here? He remembered… destroying the Gaian armada, killing thousands of soldiers during his rage for the sake of… of…

“… Kuja? Where’s Kuja?” was the next thing that came to his mind and voice.

Having expected the name to come up eventually, Mikoto caught Zidane’s hands gently. Strange, Zidane did not feel all defensive by her touch. “Kuja…” she began to say with a gulp as if she did not want that name to be brought back. She stared into her brother’s gaze which appeared innocent, almost childish. Perhaps this was the true Zidane only Kuja seemed to have known through their lives. “There is so much to tell, but… please, Zidane, allow me to explain things first.”

Well, one thing Zidane remembered quite well was his brother's death in his arms. Hearing his name from someone else brought a certain nostalgia, but he seemed to be relieved of it now. After all, the name did not prompt any of his killer instincts to surge out suddenly. Yes, he should let Mikoto give him the answers to his non-existing questions first, or else, if he decided to kill things again now, his answers might be lost forever into oblivion and his curiosity will never be quenched. Trying to adopt Kuja's former calm whenever the young man was about to have a nice conversation with someone, Zidane huffed and gave Mikoto a placid stare.

"Okay, please explain," Zidane requested before he took another deeper look at the other Genomes around him. Well, at least, from their tails, they WERE Genomes, right? "But… Mikoto, the people in this hut… They're Genomes, I can tell that, but… Kuja told me they were soulless and all. But the ones here don't seem soulless at all. They're looking at me strangely, like they're super curious to see me…"

Indeed, he saw that longing soul shining in their eyes. He even noticed how they were so reactive to whatever he was saying and how he was moving. When he spoke of them, members of his brethren

were giving him a glare of annoyance. Perhaps they did not like to be deemed as “strange” and “soulless”. Some of them whispered to each other, visibly upset about him.

Mikoto was surprised by Zidane’s comment until she realized that neither Kuja nor Zidane had actually encountered any other Genomes than her during their latest trip to Terra to defeat Garland. And considering Zidane’s early childhood, Mikoto took the guess that the boy did not remember much of the Genomes back in the days, if at all…

And of course, Zidane did not know of the new detail that the Genomes before him all had a soul of their own now. He must not remember what the eyes of a soulless Genome looked like.

“I… will explain this too,” Mikoto said. So, at least, he will get an answer for all his existential questions and he felt more relaxed now. He dropped himself back on the bed, looking up and waiting for Mikoto to speak. Depending of her answers, he will decide what to do later.

“Yeah,” Zidane sighed, not realizing he was still blankly gazing at the roof above them. “Please tell me how I ended up on this bed in this super bright hut. Last I remember, I was under the roots of the

Iifa Tree… with Kuja's body, after the Gaians have tried to… you know… kill me."

Having the guilty mind of keeping a murderous brother the world wanted dead, Mikoto could not help herself but sigh at Zidane's statement. "When you… killed the Gaian armies, it weakened Gaia's crystal enough for its assimilation by Terra's crystal. The assimilation, or rather, the fusion took place, creating a hybrid of both Terra and Gaia. Thanks to this, the cycle of souls on both planets returned to normal, with the Genomes welcoming the Terran souls. Both Terran and Gaian souls partake the cycle of souls together, allowing all the remaining Gaians to thrive normally in the new world. Even the former vegetation and the structures from Terra are now part of the Gaian surrounding. Everything was made possible for the Gaians like the living Black Mages to welcome us in their villages as we both share similarities of being created… for the wrong reasons."

Wrong reasons… Right… Zidane could not deny this aspect. "Oh, so we're in the Black Mages Village," Zidane sighed. How odd for the Black Mages to have welcomed him in their village when his brother had been manipulating them to do his biddings for some time.

“Yes,” Mikoto confirmed Zidane’s comment. How pleasant. Zidane was surprised by himself for having remained so attentive to the young girl, like he was drawn by her wisdom and somehow stoic demeanor. It probably was something about being part of the same kin. “After explaining everything to our brethren who have just gained souls, we decided to conduct a search for you, thinking we could find you alive. Thanks to a traveling Moogle, we were able to track you down underneath the Iifa Tree roots. With everyone’s help, we discovered you and brought you to this village, where we tended to your injuries and hydrated your weakening body.”

“I… see…” the boy huffed, exhausted by so much information acquired in such a short time. Somehow, a part of him incited the thought that he should not have gotten the help he had been offered, which might have even saved his life. That guilt of everything he had done in the past might haunt him for the rest of his life, now that the heavy burden of being an Angel of Death was no longer, now that he was a free man.

Free of Garland… and Kuja.

Right. There was no creator to tie his hands. There was no older brother to manipulate his world.

He had done things. Bad things. All because of them… because of himself…

He looked outside, noticing the Black Mages from earlier, all gathered to stare into the hut with a shining curiosity at the younger brother of their former master, but he sensed the fear manifesting from them. After all, just as Kuja and Zidane had both feared their creator Garland, the Black Mages feared their own creators too, and yet, there he was, lying on their bed, fully recovered from his injuries and insanity.

All thanks to them who feared him.

Did he… really deserve all this, especially from them?

“Why did the Black Mages even accept to welcome me here after knowing what Kuja and I did to them?” Zidane asked. His tone sounded harsh, but Mikoto detected the confusion in his voice.

“You’ll have to thank the Queen of Alexandria for this.”

Zidane froze at the last statement.

And there, after going through so much, thinking that his blind rage during his Trance rush had killed

everyone on Gaia, he wondered if everyone he knew from his noble days were gone from this world. He had momently forgotten about them until Mikoto brought them back to his life, all with a single name.

“Garnet’s… still alive?” Zidane questioned, eyes now broadened with a fear, shock and yet relief to know that the one he had loved still stood somewhere, far, far away from him.

“She is, just like most of her adventure companions,” Mikoto reassured. Her own smile curled up at the pleasant sight of her brother more content than she had ever seen from him. “After we have found you, as we were bringing you to the surface, the Invincible was docked before us. The Queen was there. She was crying for the deaths of the Gaians, but she was also crying for you.”

“W-What?!” The answer was so shocking Zidane fell off from his bed without realizing it. He could not tell how this was even possible after the atrocities he had caused. He wanted an answer, even if the answer might give him more scare than good. “Why did Garnet cry for me? I-I ruined her family! I killed so many…”

“I have told her about Master Garland, about the true circumstance around Kuja’s birth and yours.

She was being made aware that you've been manipulated your whole life, by both Garland and Kuja, even if Kuja had done it mainly out of fear of being alone. Kuja loved you and feared to lose the only one he could call his family."

Zidane's heart sank again at the mention of his brother, but he held on to his feelings to allow Mikoto to explain the rest.

"All these circumstances had made you into the heartless murderer the Gaians saw in you. Yet, Garnet acknowledged your good side. You have saved her life once. She has loved you for this. You have even led her and her friends to the Iifa Tree's façade that was Soul Cage and helped them defeat it. She has told me about Lady Hilda, the one you and Kuja have captured. After she has been freed from you, Lady Hilda has told them about you, how you still have treated her well and with care, how you were much more attentive to her than Kuja and even her own husband have ever been with her. She has been very touched the moment you have agreed to keep the little Summoner Eiko alive, even if it went against Kuja's wishes. There were even the servants of the Tribal House, the noble house you were part of, who have spoken about how you were a brat, and yet you held them more respect than all the other

combined nobles have ever held for them. You treated everyone equal, whether they were servants, poor, nobles, royals. This is the truest respect one can hold to the world."

This was so touching… Zidane did not know what to do, what to think of this. His entire life, he had been lied to, whether he was told no one could like a mere tailed boy like him. He'd been told that deep inside, the Gaians were aware Kuja and him were different, but the truth was that he was no different. Everyone on Gaia possessed a body, a soul and a heart, just as he did. In the end, Garnet was not an exception to the rule of deeming him different from the norm, because he had never considered the others, how they were seeing him.

And then images of his past flashed at him.

The Dwarves, how they were overjoyed to meet him and his brother, never knowing their darker intentions.

That Human young man from his kidnapping who took his time to play and speak with him and give him delicious food.

His servants coming up with a cake to celebrate his ninth birthday.

Garnet in her desperate times, crying for her mad mother to Zidane's sides and coveting his warmth, only for him to escape her loving demands…

"Underneath the dangerous butcher you are, you are still an innocent child searching for a life goal, searching for your own individuality, searching for a place to call home, a home where you can love and be loved."

Through his life, Zidane never realized how words could hurt him and yet soothe him at the same time. Wincing in pain after these shocking words of love from his sister, he had not noticed that a tear had already begun to trail down his cheek. Clutching after his chest, where a pain to the heart increased, he fought to control the hiccups that wanted to get out.

Were these Gaians right? Did he truly have a good side inside him?

"Your crimes will never be forgotten. The genocides on the Mist Continent will never be forgiven. Yet, because of the circumstances of your birth and how there was no way out for you until now, Queen Garnet decided to give you a second chance. That second chance is why the Black Mages have accepted to keep you in their village with the

condition that you will no longer bring suffering in this world.”

Mikoto had never said the word, but Zidane knew it. He did not understand much of its true significance, having no need for it during his time with Kuja. However, now he knew, since he had faced it so many times in his life.

Mercy.

Garnet had granted him a second chance because she had mercy anchored to her heart, mercy for the innocent child inside his heart whose hands were tied to a predetermined destiny, prisoner of his controlled existence. It was after losing everything that Zidane was freed from these ropes that had pushed him to the dark side.

But he had the free will. He did not feel like he deserved anyone’s mercy, especially not from her. Yes, the same woman who had probably lost her true parents during the Summoners’ fall and the adoptive ones from the Alexandrian royal family, all vanished to the cruel hands of the Tailed Brothers.

A part of him was glad to see through this second chance to realize that to be loved from a Gaian was

anything but impossible. People could care for him just as he could care for them.

“Unfortunately, she said that you are not to come back on the Mist Continent. You are still a criminal to Gaia, nevertheless. You are allowed to roam freely on the Outer Continent, but should you be seen on the Mist Continent again, they will order your execution.”

Nevertheless, Zidane did not seem offended by this. He got his second chance. Thanks to this chance, he will be allowed to make up for everything Kuja and he had done to the others. He didn’t now how he should do things, but he’ll think of something. If his little sister will gladly lend him the help he’ll need, then he felt like anything was possible.

Serene, he gave a long glare to his hands, the same hands that had been drenched of the blood of so many. Despite the obvious cleaning his Genome kin must have pushed him through during his slumber, bending his fingers seemed to give him an ache to the joints and the surface of his palms, like invisible blood stains remained anchored to them forever.

His fingers were shivering as a strange concern and sadness waved through.

Warm tears reached down on them now.

“I… I’m sorry…” Zidane stuttered as he found it hard to speak. Devastated over everything, he dropped himself into bawls and wails like a child coveting comfort from his caregiver. “G-Garnet… and the o-others… I’m so sorry…”

Gazing at the young Genome’s bursting into tears in silence, Mikoto approached her brother, indicating to the other Genomes to leave in their privacy, which they all complied. After all, what could they do with him when it was their first experience with sadness?

The young girl sat besides her crying older brother before she gave him the warmest of the embraces, a close and soft imitation to the one his elder brother would offer him in times of need. Zidane did not fight the hug. He needed it.

Even with the remorse of having taken advantage of the Black Mages’ fear to use them as servants in the Desert Palace, Zidane could not be happier to see

them again. The pleasant surprise came when he discovered that none of them had “stopped” since then. He was content to call each with their proper names once again, remembering all the mages by heart and even each of their personalities, a feat none of the Genomes were able to accomplish. Even if Genomes themselves were at most copies of each other, by now, they possessed slightly different physical features that could give others indication of who were who, like normal Gaians. The Black Mages used to fear Zidane, but they got to admit that the boy had never really been a threat to them, despite being Kuja’s loyal little brother. He was even kinder to them than Kuja had ever been with his own creations, the blond boy seeing these Black Mages as simple Gaians like the others.

It was also intriguing to observe the newly soulful Genomes having a pleasant time acquiring knowledges of this new world with the help of the Black Mages. Both species exchanged simple and complex words and their emotions of joy to form a new community altogether. As Mikoto put it, even if it took the sacrifice of so many, surprisingly, this new peaceful world was what Garland had strived for five thousand years for the souls of his Terran creators. It will certainly take more years to develop

this world into a true blend of all cultures and species, but they will have to carry on without their android mastermind.

Still, a part of Zidane felt missing and he sensed the emptiness of it. Another question to his thoughts stayed unanswered and it needed to be fulfilled. After all, the answer of Kuja's fate remained unknown to him.

"I know what you're thinking," Mikoto said to him as the two Genomes were taking a stroll together in the village cemetery, with no one else around them. "You're searching for Kuja's grave, right?"

Indeed, Zidane had spent the last two minutes scrutinizing and examining all the graves to see if one was a representative of what he knew of Kuja. To his disappointment, none of the erect graves exhibited any effigy that might have belonged or represented his brother. Did the Genomes leave him to rot along the giant roots of the Iifa Tree?

Well, if they did, Zidane must not resent them for having done such thing. He understood their decisions. Having to climb back to the surface from where he was with Kuja seemed like a difficult task consisting of dangers that would put others at risks.

And besides, Kuja was a genocide mastermind on the Mist Continent.

“Yeah,” Zidane admitted.

“Let’s walk a bit more, shall we?” Mikoto gently grabbed her big brother’s arm, leading him to No. 234’s Inn shack. When they reached in, Zidane was startled by the Genomes gathering around what looked and sounded like a Gramophone, his kin fascinated by the musical piece playing from it.

However, in the actual bedroom of the inn, there was another gathering consisting of curious Genomes and other Black Mages, all mute. “What are they doing in here?” Zidane asked Mikoto, curious of this strange meeting.

Mikoto had a coy smile forming on her lips at his question, and this had gotten Zidane even more intrigued. “Feel free to take a look,” she told him. The young man nodded and carefully pushed the Genomes and the Black Mages aside to see what crowded all around the small bunk bed.

When he discovered why, he burst into tears.

Kuja was lying on the bed, unconscious but breathing. The brother he loved was alive.

As Zidane rushed to the bed in tears, he crouched over, unable to stop his wails. He even let the tears drop on his slumbering elder sibling. He did not care that everyone was staring at him crying like a baby. He was not concerned that he looked dumb and silly. Kuja was there, alive and fully recovered, his pale face looking so peaceful and well-rested.

Mikoto approached him while telling the others to leave them by, which the Black Mages complied with first. The Genomes took few more seconds to follow the advice, not understanding why they should leave Zidane and Mikoto alone with the silver-haired Genome. As she laid a hand on Zidane's shoulder, she said, "Master Garland had made a miscalculation when he had conceived Kuja."

"M-Miscalculation?" Zidane asked along his whines and sobs while grabbing Kuja's warm hand.

"About his date of death," Mikoto continued, her smile warming up to him. "Should he die of natural causes, he might be living a shorter life than you and I, as Angels of Death. However, Kuja will live as long as a normal healthy Gaian Human. I know it's hard to believe, but a Human's lifespan is short for someone like Master Garland who had lived for five

millenniums. A human lifetime is very long for someone to experience their life to its fullest."

"T-This is surreal…" Zidane began to hush to himself, unable to take his affectionate gaze away from his sleeping brother who must had no idea that he was still part of the living world. He turned to Mikoto with wide, puzzled eyed. "B-But I've seen him… die… He died in my arms… I felt his skin getting colder, paler, his muscles getting… stiff and everything… H-How…"

"I can't say," the young girl responded, her lips curling upper. Even her usual monotone voice was gaining some warmth that was all too familiar to Zidane, the same tone when Kuja would speak kindly with him. "Perhaps you were too preoccupied with your own emotions, so you really believed that he perished, like when you lost your mind on Terra thinking Kuja had died. The most important part is that we have found you and Kuja alive beneath the roots of the Iifa Tree and that we have been able to bring you both to the surface. Kuja has been asleep since then."

"Why?"

Puzzled by the question, Mikoto froze before she blinked at him. She answered, "What? We saved you

because you both were alive.”

“No,” the young boy cut her, his tone having gained a strange anger. “Why didn’t you tell me that he was alive?”

“Oh.”

For once, Zidane read a discomfort on her face and her voice. “I’m sorry I’ve put you through this. I had to do this for a good reason. You see, thinking that Kuja has died, you have gone under a destructive rampage twice, destroying Terra’s surface and annihilating the Gaian armies, all by yourself. Without your senses and rationality to tame yourself, you might have gone on another murderous rampage.”

“If I’d tell you right from the beginning that Kuja was alive, we’ll never know what should happen next, maybe years later, if he’ll perish for real, whether it will be of natural cause or an execution by Gaians. You could become the same cold-hearted murderer that you used to be. By never telling you of his fate and with you thinking that he was still dead after your awakening, I was to see if you retained your rational mind or not.”

“I was very pleased that you maintained your rationality, and that meant you have moved on and accepted death of loved ones as a part of your life. If you were to enter into another rage after your reawakening, as long as you don’t enter Trance, I can easily eliminate you for being a threat to our kin’s survival. As the third Angel of Death, one of my main purposes in Garland’s ideal world was to be able to kill you in case you would become a threat to our existence as I can move faster than you. All this was a test, but I’m overjoyed that I didn’t need to use my abilities to eliminate my own brother.”

Well, that was a lot to gather and comprehend in one go, but Zidane seemed to have been following each word with a careful care. He had calmed himself, though the idea of being killed by this young girl in a flash sounded like a scary thought. However, the look in her eyes implied that she seemed guilty of having kept the truth away from him. “I… understand…” he said with a gulp.

Yet, he just experienced a bigger warmth, right when she had called him her “own brother”.

It must feel so nice, to have a growing family. Having a little sister did not sound so bad either,

especially when he was no longer the youngest sibling in the family.

After convincing Mikoto to leave him alone with Kuja, Zidane decided to remain in the bedroom to monitor his brother's state. He lied on the top of the bunk beds with No. 234's permission, though the mage insisted that he'll need to pay the night fees within the next month, to which Zidane agreed, even though this sounded ridiculous. No. 234 pretended this was the cost for "maintenance", but he didn't understand it himself.

No. 288 and Mikoto had told Zidane that Kuja had been unconscious since his arrival in the village a week earlier, but since Zidane had woken up earlier today, they were confident Kuja will wake up soon. Sharing this hope with others seemed to have increased his joy of being alive. Was this what friendship with others felt like?

How he wished this will last.

From the top of his bed, Zidane took a peek below from times to times, hoping to see Kuja into another sleeping pose or simply awake from his long slumber. Yes, his elder brother might still be alive,

but he feared that he might be paralyzed or in a long coma. Garland still had timed a programmed death within him, so, who knew what kind of weird things could be happening inside Kuja's body and mind?

Of course, Zidane did not find slumber the following night, too nervous with the prospect of seeing Kuja moving again… or never. Bored out of his mind, he let an arm and his tail hang down to the side of the bed, prancing them left and right like a synchronized pendulum. He went at it for the few minutes he did not count, thinking of nothing and everything. That was until something touched his tail, causing him to be alarmed in complete shock and to yelp with a high-pitched cry. When he looked down, his disappointment was visible on his face when he discovered a white cat on the floor, its wide eyes and face following the movement of his furred appendage. The small feline bounced up, trying to catch his tail.

He did not remember seeing a cat in the inn before. No. 234 must have left the entrance door open.

When Zidane became lost in thoughts, the cat jumped on his bed and positioned itself before him, giving him a long gaze. Curious to its presence,

Zidane lent out a hand to the little beast. The cat gave it a short sniff before it brushed its muzzle under his palm with a kind purr like it coveted his warmth. Surprised by the lack of fear from the animal, the Genome couldn’t help but smile at it. After a short amicable huff, Zidane returned the affection by stroking the cat’s head that pulled itself closer to the boy.

Mahila.

Zidane felt like he’d been petting his old dragon companion like the girl had found herself into the body of a cat after her defeat. How he missed the days they’d fly together, scrutinizing new lands and making trips from places to places. How he longed for the times they’d play small games together and how he yearned the era he’d spent time with her speaking of his problems. Even if he knew she could not speak back, Mahila would always listen.

The small feline freed itself from his palm and explored the bed around him. It yawned before it curled itself around Zidane’s unmoving tail, looking for slumber. Perhaps the cat was lost and his tail was the closest thing that felt like its family.

Nicely surprised, Zidane puffed a soft laugh to himself. It was so strange to see this fearless cat

curling around him and trusting his protection. If he had still been the child he used to be, he would have probably killed the same cat as a mere prey for practice purpose. Seeing the cat had no evil intention toward him and even sought for his affection triggered a pleasing happiness. Unlike what he had been hearing all his life, the Gaians were capable of giving him love.

After all, Garnet did love him behind his back.

Suddenly feeling dumb for not having the heart to move his curled tail away from the cat by the fear of waking it, Zidane maintained his furred appendage in this position for the rest of the night, even after finding slumber.

When he woke up the next morning, the cat was nowhere to be seen in the room. He scrutinized the room to its entirety until he directed his eyes to the next room from his bed, where he could see No. 234 offering the white cat a bowl of water. When he looked under his bed, Kuja still had not budged from his initial pose. Zidane sighed, but he refused to give up. If Kuja was to wake up, Zidane wanted to make sure he will not wake up alone.

Speaking of being alone, he did feel lonely all of a sudden. Once again, Zidane hanged down his tail

to sway it left and right, up and down, hoping to gain the cat's attention. Yet, it was clear the little beast was too much preoccupied by lapping the water and eating the food No. 234 handed it. How did the Black Mages even get hold on cat's food in the village? Nothing was making sense…

After a long sigh, Zidane returned to his lying position, prancing his tail to the side, bored once again. This will be another long day of doing nothing.

Until he heard a moan, not long after.

Shocked to hear something else than the silence or the sounds of his own movements, Zidane bounced from his lying position and crouched down to check the bed under him. When he witnessed the miracle of life, a wide-open smile formed on his lips.

Kuja was moving, at last.

"K-Kuja!" Zidane exclaimed his brother's name before he jumped off the bed and bended over him, shaking the elder's shoulders.

Exhausted from the long sleep, Kuja groaned again and rubbed his eyes with intensity, cleaning up his tired vision. As if dirt was stuck in his eyes, Kuja

blinked few times before rubbing his eyes again. Zidane gently shook him again, trying to get Kuja to look at him. “Kuja! You’re awake!” he called, smiling even wider. Oh no, he wasn’t going to cry of joy. He had to show up that he was an adult capable of containing his emotions. He was simply content to see Kuja moving.

Zidane’s voice seemed to have attract Kuja’s full attention now. It was the sound needed for him to come back to his full sense with his eyes broadened in shock. Fiddling with his lips like he was struggling to speak, Kuja tried getting few words out for few seconds until he was able to say the name clear and sharp. “Z-Zidane?”

“Yes, I’m here!” Zidane replied back, crouching closer to the lying man. “You’re alive! We’re both alive and well!”

“H-How…”

“I don’t know, but we live!” the younger brother exclaimed, maintaining his grin. “We’ll live for long! You’ll be okay, Kuja!”

Combining his strength to turn his body and head toward his brother, Kuja tried getting a better look at Zidane. However, his face showed absolute

confusion and worry before a small panic set in. Taken aback by Kuja's reaction, Zidane caught his sibling's cheeks. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked, now anxious.

Rising his lids and trying to intensify his glare, Kuja's eyes squinted and wandered around in confusion. "Zidane…" Kuja began, his voice weak and barely gaining volume. "I hear you, but… I can't see you…"

Frozen by the revelation, Zidane hushed a short, "Oh."

Right. He recalled the events when they were both stuck in the Iifa Tree, just before Kuja had "died". He remembered that odd, cold and vacant gaze his older brother was expressing, like there was nothing underneath these blank eyes. Right now, Kuja's eyes bore the same emptiness, the same unfilled stare that latched to nowhere and nothing in particular. These were the eyes that could not see. Kuja had told him he had become blind as a part of the process of his "programmed" death.

But if Mikoto had told him that Garland had made a miscalculation about the date of his death, then why was Kuja still blind? Was he still going to die soon?

No, that could not be, but nothing made sense…

Nevertheless, Kuja managed to catch Zidane's shaking hands and smiled at his brother's direction, though his eyes were not aiming directly at the other's worried gaze. "So, I am still unable to see," the elder sibling said with a legendary calm before he gave in to a fit of giggles. Like he was trying to offer a teasing glare at the younger brother, Kuja opened his eyes broader at him. "I am just glad that… we're both alive and well, but… Why am I even alive? I was supposed to die…"

"Kuja, I…" Zidane stopped for a second before he fought to find the right words for a clear clarification, but the poor boy had never been very good at explaining things. "… I owe you an explanation, a long one…"

Kuja sensed the discomfort in his brother's struggle into giving him that long explanation, prompting him to chuckle. "Really, now," Kuja said with his familiar, teasing tone he'd use on people other than his brother, which brought relief and a rush of joy to the younger sibling. It was so nice to see Kuja regaining his strength and his old personality back. "I truly hope that your long explanation will be worthy of my time as you're not

helping yourself with your legendary short attention span."

"That wasn't even funny," Zidane huffed with a pout, but truth be told, he was glad to get teased by Kuja again.

After being given a surprisingly clear explanation of what had occurred, Kuja seemed to be lost in thoughts. He still could not believe that such a calculating old man like Garland could make such a dumb miscalculation about his pending death. After all, the Terran android had been able to manipulate his entire environment and even others, like the brothers' wills for so many years without even leaving his home planet. So, how was this even possible?

"To err is human." They could hear the voice of a girl from the bedroom entrance. When they both turned to the voice, Mikoto hung by the door frame. She must have listened to them for some while. "Master Garland might have been a creation made by the ancient Terrans for a single purpose, to foresee and achieve the fusion of both planets. Yet, like any living creature, whether they are offered a soul or not, they can forge a will on their own. Having a will means one can make silly mistakes."

While Kuja seemed busily pleased to be allowed to meet their sister without having to spark a battle, Zidane thought of Mikoto's statement. "Like planning Kuja's date of death?" he asked, feeling dumb.

"Yes, this is one of his mistakes, and a great one, at that," Mikoto commented, bringing up her kind smile at them. Of course, Kuja did not see it, but he felt it.

"Yet, this is a mere tiny mistake," Kuja answered with a huff. "You speak of mistakes as if they are small matters at hands. We all do mistakes. However, mines are of a much larger scale. My mistakes of a great war, of the genocides on innocent people… I did all on my own will, even without Master Garland's will. I have caused the death and ruined the lives of many. The blindness that deprives me of my sense of sight must be a punishment for all the sins I've committed. Yet, it is a small one compared to the scale of my wrongdoings."

"But you are aware of your mistakes," Mikoto objected with a shake to the head. "You will have your second chance."

“Zidane deserves his second chance,” Kuja cut his sister’s statement. “He deserves it for having been manipulated by all, by Master Garland and by myself. I do not deserve the same for having willingly manipulated him to do my biddings and for having forged his emotions. I am a vile monster beyond the evilest tales.”

“And yet, your brother has forgiven you and he still loves you,” Mikoto objected and her tone had adopted a kinder tone. “Kuja, think about it. Acknowledging your mistakes is the greatest way to start your new life, your second chance. You will find a way to make up for these mistakes. Master Garland is gone now. He can no longer bring pain to you, to Zidane and to the rest of the world. You are no longer tied to his purpose or anyone. You are free to live in a world where you do not need to spread death and hatred around you.”

Uncertain of what to make out with all this information after such a short awakening, Kuja sighed and gave in to an uncomfortable wince. He gazed up, looking at nothing, but he fell into deep thoughts about his past actions.

If he was offered a second chance, then how could he make amends of his sins?

“Kuja,” Zidane called, this time, sounding calmer and more solemn, a rare characteristic from him. The boy must be dead serious. “I know we can’t change the past. Life would be too easy if we could, but… we got to try! The Black Mages have forgiven us, and they said that with our strength, we can make the world better now!”

Alarmed by the mention of the Black Mages, Kuja blinked. “The… Black Mages?”

“They welcomed us in their village!” Zidane expressed, almost too happy to say it. “Don’t you find it nice, to live in a world of peace and love? I know the idea is cheesy, but… I can’t bear to live in hatred from everyone again… We have to broaden our circle of family and friends. Together, we’ll evolve into better things!”

“The Black Mages…” Kuja whispered, his lips forming a guilty sulk. How did these mages even forgive Kuja for having used them as mere tools? “I truly owe them… How can we help them? I haven’t done any miscalculation when conceiving them. They have a short lifespan, for real…”

“Then, to start, we should find a way to make their lives longer!” Zidane exclaimed, showing off his proudest grin that Kuja couldn’t see. “You made

the promise to extend their lifespan if they came to help you at home in the desert, so let's live up to that promise before it's too late!"

Touched by his brother's greater enthusiasm, Kuja chuckled. It should not be so strange for Zidane to remember such a meaningless promise Kuja had made with the Black Mages just to make them work for him. The boy's attention was short, but he seemed to remember the things that sounded more important to him, like the promises he heard or made through his life. "Right, let's do this," Kuja said, determination coming back to him at Zidane's suggestion. "But from my understanding, I assume the Mist is gone, and yet, we're going to need the Mist to make it possible."

"There are still residual remnants of Mist around the Iifa Tree," Mikoto revealed.

With this, Kuja smiled back at his younger siblings. "Then we should head there and get the Black Mages to come with us."

"Hey, Kuja."

"Yes?"

“Can I ask you… a dumb question?”

“Zidane, don’t be scared with your questions. No questions are dumb.”

“Really? Well, I’ve been wondering, since you’ve wakened up… Now that you can’t see anything, well… How are you going to take care of your appearance?”

There was a moment of quietness around the dining table which the brothers shared. That question was the most unexpected and random after such a dramatic reunion, after all. Kuja had frozen, his glass of wine unmoved between his fingers on the table, with the only moving part of his body being his tail behind his back which curled in and out with a visible discomfort. Kuja had his gaze at Zidane’s direction, but his orbits weren’t moving. The empty glare caused some embarrassment to the blond Genome. Uneasiness in his voice, the boy claimed, “I was wondering about it since, you know, you would spend hours on makeup and combing your hair, so if you can’t see anymore…”

Instead of the silence Zidane was now expecting, Kuja broke the peace with a soft giggle. “Well, I will certainly not count on my bratty little brother to help me with this,” the elder sibling commented with few

laughs following his sentence. Zidane pouted with folded arms, somehow bothered by the comment. “Nevertheless, since I can no longer take a look at myself, my appearance should be the least of my worries.”

“Well, it still sucks that you can’t see,” the younger brother said. “If Garland made a miscalculation of your date of death, and that becoming blind was the start of the process, then you shouldn’t even be blind to begin with…”

Lost in thoughts, Kuja responded, “I can not provide an answer to this. Perhaps this was another miscalculation from his part? I am to become blind, but my actual date of death will be in long years ahead. Nevertheless, since I am granted with another life, I will use this second chance to help the world I sought to destroy. The memory of my past mistakes will not stop me from trying to amend my sins. As we have arranged for tomorrow morning, we will go to the Iifa Tree with the Black Mages to extend their lives.”

Having nothing else to add, another silence set in their room as Kuja took a sip of his wine while Zidane grabbed a huge mouthful of the food on his plate. However, their peace was quickly interrupted

by Mikoto bursting in their hut. Alarmed by the sudden blaring sound of the clasping door, both brothers spitted out the contents of their mouth. “Did I hear about appearance?” Mikoto said with her monotone voice.

“Mikoto!” Zidane shouted after her while he whipped out the spitted food around his mouth and he turned to her, furious. “You should have knocked on the door first!”

Guilty of her brothers’ reaction, Mikoto gulped. “I-I apologize,” she said, her monotone voice gaining a perceptible remorse when they noticed her tone had gotten more high-pitched. “I am still not used to Gaian customs.”

“You don’t need to know Gaian customs to know that sudden loud sounds can scare people!” Zidane protested.

“Oh,” she said. Shaking her head, she decided to ignore Zidane’s frustration. “No. 150 overheard you speak of appearance, and he told me, so… I came. You said Kuja needs to take care of his appearance. Well…” Now her voice turned shyer. “I’d like to… you know… help you with makeup and combing your hair. Kuja, you have… beautiful long hair, so… I want to practice and perfect my combing and

beauty style with you because, well… it's hard to work on my own hair, and the other Genomes' hair are too short, you know…"

The brothers went mute once again. Fearing their silence implied a disagreement, Mikoto gave them some puppy eyes, hoping this will convince them, even though she knew Kuja could not see them.

However, when she saw the smile on Kuja's face, she felt like a heavy weight off her shoulders. The eldest sibling softly laughed and said, "Why not?"

The End

Author's note*: Once again, leaving the ending open. Dunno, maybe both Kuja and Zidane have a Genome girlfriend and they have children and live happily ever after. Or they have Genome boyfriends if you're a yaoi fan. Or better, Kuja x Zidane becomes a reality (but then, in this story, nope). Or Garnet marries Zidane somehow, lol. I still stand by the fact that Summoners/Humans cannot reproduce with Genomes due to their different genetic setups. Or if they can, they will produce an infertile hybrid like most of real-life animal hybrids (like Ligers / Tigons, Zonkeys, etc.).*

I actually don't ship Zidane or Kuja with anyone (not even Zidane and Garnet despite this fic as I've never been fan of the hero/knight x princess ships). Pretty much the only ones I ship in FFIX are Steiner and Beatrix. Oh, and Freya and Sir Fratley to a certain extent.

All these references to "a place to call home" through this fic obviously allude to one of the two main theme songs of the game, literally called 'A Place to Call Home' (or "The Place I'll Return to Someday"), which is my favorite FF "main theme" in the series along with FFVI main theme (Terra's theme). Same with the whole "Alone" title, which alludes to the "You're Not Alone" famous scene and song in the game, probably one of my favorite gaming scenes ever.

Ending 4: Chance

This fourth ending could be a one-shot fic on its own, actually. It's also the longest chapter of this fic.

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Ending 4: Chance

Goodness, what was that?

Why did all these awful images of Zidane destroying everything went through his mind like a sharp hologram? Was this the consequence of having manipulated the boy into doing his bidding for his entire life? Was this truly what the boy deserved after all this and all that?

Wait, no.

There he was, in the Invincible in front of the control stand of the forbidden teleporter. Still adorned with these awful, yet comfortable Terran garbs, Kuja looked at himself in shock like he had returned to the past from a future that had yet to occur. Before him, Zidane, as a four-year-old child, stood silently, his eyes curious about the shock on

his older brother's face. His curiosity soon turned into worries as Kuja's shock remained for long, from which the elder shook his head to toss his concerns away.

This was it. Kuja was no prophet, and yet… All these years ahead that had flashed in his mind, where both Zidane and he went on a rampage on Gaia over the time to bring corruption, destruction and war… All these years watching his little brother growing into a young man full of sadness and hate, a boy who truly coveted to be loved, deep inside, all with the fear of being alone…

All this was too real.

What if… What if everything Kuja had been imagining was a foreshadowing of what awaited Zidane if the boy was to remain with him on Terra as a true Angel of Death?

Puzzled by everything, lost in thoughts, Kuja still imagined himself allowing Zidane to lead such a sad life. The boy might be Garland's creation as much as himself, but the child deserved better than growing under the miserable, failed personage that Kuja was.

No, Zidane wasn't going to become a mad man. He will lead a normal life, just like anyone with a

soul should, like a true Gaian.

After experiencing these long years of catastrophes ahead in his imagination, Kuja felt like he had come back to the present again. Returning to the reality of the present had given Kuja his second chance to save Zidane from a pending doom soaring over him, if he was to stay here. Kuja wanted Zidane to stay with him, and yet, he would be too heartbroken to let him become the greatest puppet of Terra.

Once again, he gazed at the teleporting pod in front of him to check if everything was still. Indeed, the tranquil, yet confused four-year-old child stood there, still unaware of what Kuja was thinking or what he was planning. As any obedient, good-mannered kid should be, Zidane thought that obeying his big brother to stay on this pod was the best decision.

So, he still waited, patiently.

Zidane, you'll go on Gaia, and then, you'll live there. I believe you are a survivor.

Yes, Kuja recalled what he had told his little brother earlier. However, Zidane's response had brought such a pain to his heart.

Kuja…?

It still hurt to this time. It was so excruciating Kuja winced while holding his chest hard, feeling the knot forming underneath. The young man could no longer tell if leaving Zidane alone on Gaia will save him, but it might be better than watching him grow into an insane Angel of Death.

You understood what I just told you, right?

Kuja had wanted the confirmation from his brother's own lips. Yet…

Y… Yes…?

And then, Zidane's reply had hurt so much again.

That pause before his answer told everything. Clearly, that pause implied that Zidane's reply was only a means to please Kuja, to show that he was a big boy, that he had understood everything his big brother had told him, despite his awful attention. Kuja had been well aware that Zidane had no idea what was going on and what Kuja had in mind.

But the elder brother knew what had to be done. Leaving Zidane on Gaia was the better choice.

Great, Zidane. Stay here.

When Kuja had said that, he had given a soft stroke on the worried child's cheek before he had left to the control stand, where he stood now. That gentle touch might be the last time they'll ever touch each other.

Or worse, see each other.

This was his only chance, a chance to save himself… No, to save Zidane from Garland.

Wait a second… What if… it was possible to save Zidane and himself? Together, the brothers might be able to lead a better life on Gaia, where they will both grow and experience what a normal life should be, and they'll both get to keep their souls. They'll get their chance to become happy with their lives where their hands will no longer be tied to their programmed destiny as Angels of Death, where they will have no purpose of life other than thriving in a world. They will enjoy life together.

And yet, Kuja knew this was impossible. Someone had to take control of this teleporter, and Zidane was certainly too young to grasp at the mechanic behind these controls. And even if Kuja somehow managed to teleport both to a random place on Gaia and escape with his little brother, Garland will find a way to find them both. If ever,

the only thing that will cross the old man's mind will be to steal Kuja's soul back. He will become the empty vessel like his soulless kin, wandering around and proceeding into random assigned tasks, for eternity. Yet, Zidane will probably get to keep his soul because he was deemed too precious to Garland…

Well, it was time. Shutting his eyes…

"Good bye, Zidane."

Kuja pressed the final teleport button. As the light surrounded the child, as Zidane realized what was happening, panic quickly set in.

"K-Kuja! No! Kuja! Ku—"

…

When Kuja rose his lids up, he gazed to the teleport pod. Zidane was gone.

… How strange. He hadn't realized that something was creeping over his cheek. When he went to brush the cheek with a finger, there was a warm, wet substance descending over the skin. His fingers slowly trailed up to his orbit, where the wet fluid came from. And then, he stared at his hand.

A transparent, clear watery drop like one of these tears that would usually escape his brother's eyes when he was crying like an annoying brat.

No, that could not be. Kuja was everything but an annoying brat. He might have been granted with a soul as much as Zidane and anyone on Gaia, but he will not descend to his bratty level of crying for small things. Even if Kuja might be a twelve-year-old which, by Gaian standards, should still be a child before adolescence, the idea of others seeing him as a child was dumb. He was created as he was, as a mature adult. Kuja had to act like an adult.

However, the thought prompted a soft smile out of him. Emotions will only get in the way.

Calmly, Kuja returned to Bran Bal like nothing had happened. Like with each boring day on Terra, none of the Genomes around him bothered to notice his presence. These soulless husks knew that Kuja had been named as their future savior, but they did not possess the cognitive feelings to be able to manifest pride and contentment over their different sibling. Even with Kuja around them, they carried on with their mindless tasks that had been assigned by Master Garland. From his location, Kuja spotted a group of Genomes cleaning their dwellings. When

he visited the basement of the grand laboratory, some were noting the health progresses made from one sick Genome slumbering inside one of these tanks, where all Genomes had seen life for the first time of their mindless existence.

When he took a stroll around the clear crystal lake in the middle of the town, a male Genome child stood there, staring at nothing in particular.

Kuja froze.

“Z-Zidane?!”

The child took notice of him. For an instant, he gazed at him with his blank eyes before he walked past him as if no one had called.

The silver-haired Genome sighed in relief. Of course, how silly of him. Zidane was nowhere on Terra. He had been teleported away on Gaia, he didn’t know where, which might be better that way. Kuja suddenly cursed against Garland in silence for having created his second angel based on all the others’ appearance. From what another Genome had told him, Garland had used the same genetic setup for Zidane as all the others to not waste too much time conceiving a Genome with a unique appearance, unlike Kuja. If it wasn’t for Zidane

owning a soul that had gifted him with a personality of his own, Kuja might have a difficult time differentiating his own little brother from the other male Genome children.

Oh goodness. Why did he always have Zidane in his mind? The boy was gone on Gaia, where he will stay, where he'll grow up on his own, where he'll be safe from Garland. There was nothing to worry about!

Dammit, but it was so hard to think about something else, when the event of leaving him on Gaia was still so fresh and when there were copies of him everywhere…

"Kuja?"

That resounding, deep voice haunting the boundaries of Terra. Only one creature on his home planet possessed that voice. Kuja knew he had to face him one day or another. Their meeting was inevitable. "Yes, Master Garland?" Kuja responded without even turning to the old man.

"Where is Zidane?" the ancient android asked, straight to the point. "Normally, he wanders around with you."

Of course, Garland only had his eyes set on his perfect Angel of Death. After all, Zidane had been created to replace Kuja when his strength will surpass him, eventually.

How… How could the old man's presence hold such an effect to his willpower?

Kuja had prepared a whole speech to explain Zidane's disappearance. He had it in mind, all by heart until now, where all his long words and complex sentences vanished like smoke in the air. All the syllables gone from his mouth as he fought to find the words, he gasped to catch his speech again, wherein his throat and tongue remained mute and unable to speak. Even the assured smile he wore during his stroll in Bran Bal was swept away by an unexplainable sulk that he could no longer control. Before he grasped at it, his body stopped moving but his tail shivered, surrendering him away to his master who now had a hunch of what had happened to his precious angel.

"Where is Zidane?!" Garland repeated, but this time, the tone of his voice was sounding angrier and firmer.

Nothing was said, and Kuja gasped at his empty words.

But whatever should come out of his mouth, it did not matter. Whether Kuja had the answer to this or not, the young man was welcomed by a violent strike on the face, enough to pack some blow that rendered him unconscious, he didn’t know how long.

When Kuja came back to his senses, his body was stiff in a strange pain and he could feel few injuries across his skin. However, he was not sure if he was actually awake when all he could see was darkness and all he could hear were the breath of his own throat and the pumping of his heart. The silence befell over his quiet environment so hard that after some times, he believed he could hear the flow of the blood inside his veins. He tried to cast a Cure magic on himself, but the anti-magic field in this small void would not allow him to do anything but fear and panic.

It was that damn old man! He had shoved him in the dark room again!

His panic intensifying, Kuja banged to the wall, screaming Garland’s name and begging him to let him out. His fear increased when he realized that his master remained on deaf ears to his screams of despair, like he had intentionally left him alone in

the room just to make sure the fear was implemented in him enough. If Kuja had to be the rebellious child, Garland will have to make sure to torture his mind enough to bring him back to compliance.

No, after going so far, Kuja refused to befall into compliance again! He had a soul! He had the right for freedom!

Yet, owning a soul had its downside, like giving the possibility for someone else to screw his thoughts enough for him to breakdown in this room, completely alone and devoid of light and sounds other than his own fears.

Kuja could no longer count the hours, or even days, he was left inside that damned room, but it certainly brought insanity to his heart and mind.

When Garland opened the door after a long, long time, the light blinded the young man inside the dark room. Kuja felt like his pained eyes were burning with acid as he gave away a shriek of misery and surrendered himself in a fetal position, where he could not control the shiver running across him. His body reeked of sweat and terror and his lips uttered some non-senses and gibberish beyond normal comprehension.

“Zidane might be lost, but I still can get some use out of you,” Garland told him, not even intimidated by the despair from his failed prototype.

Kuja did not flinch. Even the name of the second Angel of Death did not stir him away from his madness. He had no friend. He had no family. He had no brothers. He had no love.

Kuja no longer cared.

Zidane couldn’t tell how he had fallen into a deep sleep, but when he woke up, he was no longer in the Invincible.

Actually, he couldn’t tell where he was, though…. But this looked like a strange forest.

He cried his brother’s name, expecting him to come to get and bring him back home to Bran Bal. However, after several minutes of bouncing from place to place in this bizarre jungle, he realized his screams fell into deaf ears when Kuja never manifested his presence, wherever he ran. His cries were lost to the alien greenery and he was surrounded by the dense vegetation, the humid air and the hot, almost unbearable temperature, all too

different from the familiar environment he knew of Gaia. Not too far from him, a small river flowed through the place bordered by great trees and high cliffs. The cries and chants of insects and birds made up the oddly melodic orchestra of this forest. This was a world unknown to him, so alien from the near empty Outer Continent he had visited often with his brother on Gaia.

Thinking Kuja was lost somewhere among the dense and humid environment, the tears of worry began to blur his vision, wherein his body started to shiver with something so close to agony.

The unknown world did not scare him, but he feared to be alone. He wanted to find Kuja in this place.

Several hours must have elapsed for the child to have searched for his big brother in the wild world of the cruel, lively Gaia. Thankfully, all the exploration and trips made to the Outer Continent wilderness taught him he should always remain quiet when he wandered around to avoid being seen by preys and predators alike. He refrained from crying or call his brother’s name again to hide his presence. Yet, without a guardian to guide him through this new wilderness, it seemed so difficult to

follow these unwritten rules. For now, Zidane only had his small stature, his agility and his talent for stealth to protect himself.

He had to stay strong if he wanted to find Kuja. He had to prove him that he was a capable boy who will achieve anything like a grownup.

And suddenly, all was dark and painful.

The event had been so abrupt it had taken him few seconds to realize that a heavy and big object had pushed him straight to the ground at near full weight, like it was trying to flatten him against the soil. Zidane screamed, but thanks to the softness of the ground, his light weight and his small body, the boy was granted a chance to escape barely at the cost of severe injuries he could feel underneath his back. Having learned to bear painful damages through his life thanks to his travels with Kuja, Zidane jumped away from the thing restraining him. He bounced back on his weakening, yet energetic legs, allowing him to get a full view of the thing that had tried to squish him to death.

It was a gigantic monster with big hooves, great pointy horns under its muzzle and a mane on its head and the back of its neck.

The child had never faced this monster before, but the one second he was given to look at the ferocious, roaring creature was enough time to indicate evil intentions upon him. The beast was looking for an easy snack like a small Genome.

But having explored the unknown wilderness of Gaia had taught him another useful trick to defend himself from predators, and that was to not freeze before them. Gathering his courage to face this monster, Zidane hissed at it and launched high from his spot. He landed on the monster's neck where he immediately gripped to its mane. Thanks to the monster's body constitution, the beast was only able to jump in distress when it realized it couldn't even reach for the tiny boy glued to its neck. With wild, mad bounces, it struggled to propel the child away from it, but Zidane's grip to its mane was too strong.

Trying to tame down the maddened beast, Zidane opened his mouth and bit deep into the back of its neck, prompting the creature to bark a blaring shriek of pain. With a quick move, the boy rose his head, allowing him to take a huge piece of flesh out of the monster between his teeth. His mouth and face full of blood, the child spat the flesh out before sinking his teeth again into the open injury, deepening his bite until he was able to reach the creature's nerves.

As the intense loss of blood weakened the creature, Zidane launched himself away from it, reaching for the branch of the tree above him. Without thinking, he tore a solid stick before he jumped back on the beast's neck. Using his two hands, he stabbed the monster with his stick, straight to the deep wound and hitting its vital part.

With a last roar, the monster froze. And then, it lied down on the ground in defeat, killed by a tiny Angel of Death.

Panting deep as he wiped out the blood out of his face, Zidane wanted to collapse and relax. The battle against this giant monster exhausted him to the point he sensed the shaking of his legs and the injuries he had sustained before. His legs losing strength, the child dropped to his knees and whined in pain, his tears blurring his vision.

In another desperate attempt, Zidane rubbed his eyes to toss the tears away and looked around, calling "Kuja" over and over, hoping for him to show up so he could heal his pain and his injuries as he'd do each time.

Despite his continuous calls, Kuja did not show up.

His back leaned against the beast's corpse, Zidane began to feel the extent of the strange changing weather around him. He had woken up to a hot and humid environment, only to end this evening into a freezing night. As the corpse was still fresh, it provided some warmth to his body. However, he would rather find comfort by trying to wrap himself with his small tail. Obviously, this wasn't enough to cover him, so he resigned himself to wrap the beast's tail around him instead.

"Kuja…" he whispered with more tears escaping his lids.

Exhaustion did not seem enough for him to find slumber when the sound of the wilderness maintained him wide awake. He remembered his nights with Kuja in the wild Gaia were dangerous, though a camp fire would drive the monsters and other animals away. However, without Kuja's magic, Zidane knew no way to cast a Fire spell on his own or to create one with the available resources here.

And speaking of the good warm Fire, when he felt the wounds on his back calming and his pain subduing, the boy felt a low growl inside his stomach. He realized he hadn't eaten for some time. His latest meal came long before his sudden

appearance in this strange world. He had to eat something, but nothing looked very appetizing here. The only available food was the corpse of this monster, and while Zidane craved for meat, he didn't know if this beast was tasty nor that he had a Fire ready to cook the meat. He had eaten raw flesh with Kuja before, but that had tasted worse than any of the synthetic food on Terra.

But without Kuja on the way and being nowhere near him, the survival instincts kicked in and Zidane jumped back to where he had planted the stick into the wound. Hesitantly, he sank his teeth into it, searching for a piece of meat and began gnawing at it.

To his shock, the taste was not so bad.

Well, for now, he will have to deal with what was offered to him, and few pieces of this flesh will help him sustain longer in this world.

He went for a last piece of meat until he discovered some flies buzzing around him as they were trying to land on the bloodied injury. Frustrated and annoyed by them, Zidane hissed and tried to toss them away, thinking this prey was his. It was minutes later that he realized it was futile to fight

against such tiny flying bugs that became more abundant with time.

The stench of dry blood hit him so hard suddenly that he thought it should be the better time to get a bath, remembering Kuja's advice that the smell of blood always attracted more dangerous predators. Zidane dashed to the nearby river where he began to take a long cold bath under the starry night. After getting used to the cold water, Zidane felt like he wanted to remain in the gentle flow of the water longer, experiencing comfort from it.

Until he heard more sounds of roars and growling.

After being so tired, fighting more predators now didn't sound like a good idea.

When he came back to the carcass to find his sleep, he found himself facing other animals and monsters surrounding it and devouring all that was left of it. Horrified by the sight of his prey being stolen away, Zidane jumped after them and in a desperate move, he tried pushing them away. However, the pack regrouped together to toss the child away, fervent of keeping that carcass for themselves. Too exhausted to fight them and knowing they were not going to let him have another

piece of it, the boy resigned himself to failure and left them.

Zidane continued his search for home under the starry night until the slumber reached him. Unable to proceed with his journey, he crawled into a fissure of a giant trunk. Only an hour passed when a lone Fang woke him and attacked him with a brutal, violent awakening. As Zidane hissed at it and bounced away, the Fang took its place and lied down in the fissure, decided to not let anyone else steal its home, and especially not a Genome child.

Drained, the boy wandered around for another hour before he dropped to the ground on the grass, hitting slumber in the middle of nowhere, exposed to all creatures. He woke up the next morning, thankfully without another monster attacking him or even having hurt him during his sleep. Lady Luck must have been accompanying him through his sleep…

He thought to follow the familiar bright blue light of Terra to find his home. However, the blue sky of Gaia did not quite offer the same lighting as the one on Terra, as the sky of Gaia felt warmer to him and more pleasant to look at. Yet, he thought that warm sky might lead him to home where Kuja must be.

His big brother must be sick worried… To avoid attracting too many creatures around him and craving for his brother’s presence, Zidane whispered Kuja’s name all the time, hoping he will reappear to welcome him in his arms, like he’d do each time. He’ll find Kuja. Kuja will help him relieve of his injuries and he’ll offer him warmth and love.

How he missed his family and his home.

Everything hurt so much. His body, his memories… Where was home? Will he ever get back home under the painful, yet familiar bright light of Terra?

The sleep he could not enjoy in this alien area had been so scarce and rare in time that he still felt exhausted in the middle of the day. Trying to find a good place to enjoy sweet dreams, the boy climbed to a large tree, where he was able to find a crevasse in the trunk. Unfortunately, he was woken up by the hiss of a snake. Kuja had taught him that snakes, despite their small sizes, were really dangerous animals, not because of their strength, but their speed and venom that will inflict a nasty venomous ailment. If not tended with an antidote or a magic healing spell which Kuja was capable of, one will die in a slow and excruciating death if bitten by a

snake. Zidane was fast enough to avoid predators, but he might be too slow to duck the deadly bite of a snake if he was not paying attention.

Not wanting to find his end here, he moved to another tree, only to face the same problem with another snake.

Nowhere was safe anymore…

Yes, the boy was only a child. He might possess a subpar endurance, but his strength and will were not infinite. He needed the sleep, but a noise or another monster kept him awake and alerted, stressing him and making him shed tears out of great fatigue.

A long, deep sleep would be so nice, right now.

The morning he came to seemed to stretch for so long he wasn’t sure if he reached afternoon yet. He continued to wander around but, in the end, he decided it was best to return to the spot where he had awakened to this bizarre world.

The beast he had killed earlier had now turned into a rotting corpse, now with parts of the bones exposed to the air and flies soaring everywhere. While the stench around it was unbearable, Zidane did not want to stray away too far from this area. After all, this was where he found himself to, and

perhaps Kuja knew that he was here. The elder sibling will certainly come to get him anytime soon, because Kuja loved him too much to leave him here alone for too long.

And without realizing it, he fell asleep around the corpse's tail like it was the only unaffected part of the body. Despite the sleep he had finally found, he heard in his dreams the noises of the gnawing from other wild beasts devouring the remaining fleshes and bones. With such an easy meal available to all, Zidane could only guess that he was safe from other predators as long as there still were fleshes on the corpse. Carnivore would go after an already dead meat rather than a defending, fast tiny Genome. At least, the stench did not matter anymore. He just needed the sleep he had been coveting for some while.

When the monsters and animals came after the tail, Zidane would wake up and scare the creatures away with a hiss.

For the next days, he'd wait around the corpse, finding comfort around the monster's tail and sleeping with it until it was no longer recognizable. Each day, he hoped to wake up by Kuja, to return home on Terra, even with the painful blue light to

look at. Today, on the corpse, there was nothing but bones. He could no longer stay here. He had to find another shelter.

After reconsidering his plans, since Kuja was still not here, perhaps his brother was lost somewhere in this forest and waited for Zidane to find him.

He wandered to the unknown again, crying and whispering Kuja's name, hoping his brother will hear him. Yet, he was always welcomed by silence. For an hour, after trying to extend his search area to more unknown areas, he wasn't sure where he was going until the familiar greenery was getting scarcer and rarer to his surroundings. Soon, he reached to what seemed like the end of the forest when he descended a cliff, and ahead of him, there was a wide empty plain in the horizon.

But there was something strange ahead, far, far away from where he stood.

Miles and miles away, he saw a large, dark structure with so many smaller things that looked like houses surrounding it, with many hovering machines levitating around the structure and away in the sky, moving at slow paces. The floating things, while far away, appeared to bear some resemblance

to the Invincible, but it was hard to tell if they were airships too.

But with this technology ahead, perhaps Kuja was there!

For once since he had put his foot in this alien forest, a wide smile spread through his lips. His instincts told him he'll have more chance to find his big brother over there. He prepared to get a boost to run ahead until he dropped down to the ground. Shocked by this awkward move, Zidane tried to put himself on his feet, which he managed on the left leg. Yet, as soon as he put himself on the right foot, his leg surrendered its strength with a sudden pain spreading through. The boy shrieked as he fell to the ground again, his tears coming back to sting his eyes.

Unlike the tears he had shed earlier, these ones were from the pain amplifying beneath his right leg. When he struggled to take a look where the pain was the strongest, he spotted a small snake close by, slithering away from him to hide back in the tall grasses.

Zidane had been bitten by a venomous snake.

No, he could not stay here. He was still exposed to everything; animals, predators, monsters… He had to walk to somewhere and hide with the hope the poison will subdue and he will get better after. However, with the pain and the beginning of a paralysis starting to spread from his right leg, he realized he couldn’t walk anymore. As the panic and the adrenaline rushed in, he fought to reach for the nearest shelter which seemed to be a small crevasse at the bottom of the cliff he came from. The poison having reach both his legs, the boy struggled to use his arms to crawl to the place, but he grasped the strength of his upper limbs were beginning to fade into an unbearable pain.

Still, with a last push, he barely reached to the shelter.

Lying to the ground, half-exposed to all, the child wailed and cried. He thought things could not get worse until he heard the grounding sky covered by dark, grey clouds. Soon enough, droplets turning into a torrent poured down over him, making his body feel even heavier than it already seemed like. Bawling through the rain, Zidane called his brother’s name, wanting Kuja to come and heal him from the poison that was paralyzing him and causing great pain beneath.

Having lost the mobility of his arms, the child could no longer move into the shelter completely. The young Genome cried, his voice losing vigor with each scream. At this point, he was unable to tell if the water on his face was the rain or the big tears flowing from his eyes. He was exposed to the rain and to the predators, and the poison in his body was bringing him closer to death with each passing minute.

Perhaps he will never see Kuja again, after all.

When the poison reached closer to his head, Zidane could not cling to his consciousness, but maybe this was a better fate.

As he closed his eyes and let the slumber take over, the pain subdued, at least.

His last thought flashing at him was the image of his fading older brother.

…

Kuja?

Zidane… I'm so sorry. I have to go.

No, Kuja!

It is better that way. The mean old man can't get you if you stay here.

No, no!

Good bye…

Outraged to see his brother vanishing in the thin air, Zidane launched from his spot, trying to catch him to prevent him from disappearing. However, when the boy reached to him, Kuja was already gone.

Somehow, Zidane knew this was a nightmare, a figment of his imagination. He knew he was sleeping. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare, where he might find his brother, but even during his slumber, he could not find the way out of this fearful dream. He was unable to wake up.

Was this his fate until the end? Was this how death was?

In his sleep, he cried.

"Oh man, why does it have to rain?"

"…"

“Hey, Marcus, listen to me for once! I’m speaking!”

“Blank? What is it?”

“Why did Baku have to choose this rainy day to camp at Pinnacle Rocks? I’m soaked to the bones, dammit!”

“Did you even listen to him? Rain or not, we have to learn how to survive all types of weathers and environments.”

“Yeah, I know that, but…”

“So, stop complaining, kiddo.”

“But I feel so heavy. My clothes are ruined.”

“Survival, Blank. Survival.”

“Woah! Hey, Marcus! Look what I’ve found!”

“Huh? What is it? Wait, is this…”

“See this? What’s a shirtless kid doing here? It’s sleeping in the rain, and it’s all dirty and it stinks…”

“Blank. Don’t call this kid an ‘it’. He certainly looks human, but why is he sleeping right in the middle of nowhere?”

“He? I thought he was a girl for a moment, with the long hair, his weird skirt and all. It’s hard to tell kids in these days.”

“You’re a kid as much as this kid, Blank.”

“I’m seven! I’m not a kid anymore!”

“My comment still stands.”

“Marcus! That’s not funny! I don’t look like a girl!”

“Hush, kiddo. Don’t speak too loudly. You might attract some monsters.”

“Mmm… Marcus…? Since when do humans have tails?”

“Hm? Since never?”

“Then this means… I’ve just discovered a new race of humans! Because I’m the one who made the discovery, I will call this species ‘Monkyboi’!”

“Monkey… boy…? Blank, this’s a really dumb name for a race, species or whatever. I’m sure this boy’s human as us. Maybe it’s a fake tail? Or a mutation? Or maybe some witch has cursed him with a tail?”

“Boys? What’ve ya got?”

Startled by the husky, deeper call behind them, a teenager and a young boy bounced before they turned around, only to see two older men walking closer to them with few equipment and loaded bags on their back. The kid who went by the name of Blank rushed to the men and called them. “Baku! Cinna! We found a kid with a tail sleeping over there!” he exclaimed and pointed behind him.

The taller bearded man with huge bat ears over his head, Baku, stopped from his stroll and deposited his equipment on the wet ground. For few seconds, he looked to where Blank pointed and he stroked his beard in thoughts. Seeing nothing, he adjusted his goggles, trying to spot what Blank spoke of. “Huh, really?” he began. “Never heard of a kiddo with a tail, unless it’s a Burmecian kid. Is he or she even human?”

The young teenager Marcus coming closer to the group, he added, “Yeah, he looks pretty much human to me. He just has a weird monkey tail, but I can’t say if it’s a real one or just a prop.”

“Humans with a tail don’t exist. How’s that even possible?” the final young bearded man named Cinna inquired, gently tapping his strange hammer

over his shoulder. “Why would someone even wear a tail prop in the middle of nowhere, anyway?”

“Hey, we never know. There’re all kinds of people wandering on Gaia,” Marcus added.

Losing no time to chitchat with the group, Baku walked to where Blank had pointed, closer to the cliff where he discovered what he sought for. A slumbering, frail and tiny child lied inert on the ground, his body and attire covered in mud. His breathing was slow and deep, so he did seem to be sleeping. The exposed furred tail on the child was curled against his body like it was trying to cover him despite its small size. Obviously, this was not enough to keep him warm. Being exposed in the middle of nowhere, out in the open, left him at risk to the cold rain, the wind and the predators.

However, this did not seem to be the worst part. As he crouched down to get a closer look upon the child, he spotted trace of blood stains scattered on his tattered skirt, the only cloth on him. On the surface of his skin, several injuries and smaller cut made up the roughness of the wild battles against nature he must have been engaged to. From the look of it, that boy must be a fighter.

The poor kid. He appeared so tired.

But that was when he noticed something more alarming than the exposed wounds.

The child’s changing skin color indicated that he had been poisoned, probably by one of the monsters present in this wild Pinnacle Rocks forest.

Trying to keep his composure, Baku didn’t want to lose any more time. He searched into his small bag to get a bottle of Antidote out. Careful, he pulled the boy away from the wet ground and laid him on his arms, holding him like a small baby. Quickly but delicately, he poured down the bottle content into the child’s mouth. The relief came to him when he noticed the unconscious boy seemed to be swallowing the content down his throat, which will heal him of the nasty poison that was killing him. But this might not be enough to put him back on his feet. Baku dived his hand into his bag again, this time getting a Potion out. He repeated the same move with that content, and thanks to Baku’s fast action, the little boy regained a faster breath and more lively colors on his skin.

However, having been exposed to the cold and the rain seemed to have afflicted him with a light hypothermia, which had now become the most

worrisome part of this misfortune. It did not help that the child was still unconscious.

One could not imagine someone as imposing and bossy as Baku getting all concerned and softy with children, especially a man leading a group of actors and thieves by the name of Tantalus. People respected him over his convictions, his good deeds and his harshness over his followers and members. His loud sense of humor might even scare few people away. However, Baku always had a soft spot for children. Most of Tantalus members were made up of orphaned children lost in streets, children who he had saved from hunger and poverty. Yet, he'd been nowhere close to the fatherly type.

Even to the members under his group, it was so strange to watch him holding a tiny child like he was his own.

"Okay, boys, we'll set up our camp here and we're goin' to keep a look at this kiddo!" Baku ordered his crew while holding the child, and the rest quickly proceeded with setting up their fortune homes in this wilderness. He hoped his cries would have awakened the kid, but perhaps he needed the rest after enduring what had looked like a difficult life in this wild area. Being warmed by Baku's arms

seemed to have helped the child a little as his shivers from the cold temperature had stopped now. He was getting better, slowly but surely. This was good news.

They had to remain here to provide him protection. He could not leave the weak child exposed to all the dangerous beasts roaming around Pinnacle Rocks. There even had been a rumor running among the folks of Lindblum about a ghost wandering around the forest. If this was true, leaving this child here was another risk Baku did not want to test when the ghost could have malicious intents as any predators here.

He was about to take off his vest to cover him until he felt the child stirring within his arms. The boy had his eyes shut, but Baku saw his hands twitching, his tail brushing against Baku's body like it tried rolling around him and his lips moving with a weak, high-pitched murmur surging.

"Ku… Kuja…"

Baku nearly jumped of shock. He hadn't actually expected the tail to be a real one and to curl against him. This whole thing was surreal, but he had learned to maintain his calm during unusual situations. However, the word that came out of the

kid appeared to indicate that the child was dreaming and speaking during his sleep. Baku could not tell if the dream was a pleasant one, but he seemed moved by the tears that were shed from the kid's eyes with a tiny smile forming on his lips as he murmured "Kuja" again.

He was dreaming of a certain "Kuja" right now, something he must love dearly.

So, what the heck was a Kuja? Was this a thing, a pet, someone? Could that Kuja be his caregiver? If that was the case, were they the one who had left this child here? Or was a certain Kuja killed by the monsters here, thus leaving the child to fend for himself alone in this dangerous area?

Well, with the way the child was speaking of something and with the odd detail that he was wearing at least one piece of cloth, tattered and stained as it was, Baku figured out the boy must not be a feral child, which will make everything easier.

While Baku became lost in thoughts trying to figure out what had happened to the child to reach this place, he had taken no notice that his crews had already completed their fortune tents. For young people working under the rain, they seemed to have rushed the job and he doubted the tents would hold

up very long in this rain. Nevertheless, this annoying torrent was starting to weaken, leaving everyone soaked to the bones and exhausted from their work.

Carefully replacing the sleeping child in his arms, Baku walked to the camp, joining his crew. Curious to examine the tailed child closer, Cinna ran forward their boss. Unfortunately, his foot slipped into the mud and he dropped head first, with his hammer propelled into the air until it landed against a rocky ground, where the blasting sound of a metallic clang resounded all around.

It caused the child to open his eyes…. and to shriek in panic when he realized something was holding him.

Something the child didn’t recognize.

Without warning, the small boy hissed and kicked the odd humanoid away from him, launching him few meters away as the child landed on the wet ground. Startled by the painful kick that such a tiny child could pack, Baku was soon accompanied by the rest of his crew who came to help him get up from the muddy ground. However, when the tailed boy tried escaping from them, he soon discovered that there was no other way out as he was surrounded by these men and the cliff behind him.

With the now gone rain that had left the cliff slippery, he could not climb these high cliffs anymore.

Who were these humanoids? How did they get to him? The imposing one he had kicked out of the way looked so strange, with a big purple beard and fur around his arms, his eyes covered by some huge goggles and strange huge bat-like ears standing over his skull. All the others with him were of smaller stature but all much bigger than the child himself. They did look like his soulless siblings, but they were all appearing so different, with different hairstyle, hair color, skin color and the strangest of all, they had no tail.

They were no Genomes, for sure.

These humanoid creatures and the tailed child glared at each other. They remained at it for few seconds, trying to inspect each other.

What were they? Were they coming to eat him too?

Leaning against the cliff with no way out, the boy snarled at them before he growled, adopting his defensive pose like he was expecting them to attack him. Having no weapon than his hands and his teeth,

the boy bared his teeth and exposed his spread fingers, his tail balancing left and right in sync with his heavy breath. The group of men were shocked by the surge of courage coming from this feral-looking child trying to take on them all despite his obvious disadvantage in number and his great fatigue as his body appeared to be shivering. The lesser members of the group were left in confusion at the kid's strange acting and they were captivated by the moving tail behind him as they did not envision the furred appendage to be a real one. Meanwhile, Baku maintained his cool and got hold of himself. Keeping his calm, the man slowly approached the kid by leaving his sword on the ground behind.

"Woah, kiddo. Easy, there," Baku hushed, retaining his low tone, displaying his empty hands to show that they were devoid of weapons and that he bore no malicious intent on the kid. However, Baku's calm demeanor had not changed the wild child's attitude.

"Don't tell me this brat's really feral!" Cinna exclaimed from afar while picking up his hammer.

The idea of having to deal with something feral prompted little Blank to draw his hand toward his sword, but Marcus stopped him from making the

situation worse. “Let the boss deal with him,” Marcus told him as he slowly pulled the kid and Cinna backward, leaving some space for Baku to speak and appease the strange kid.

The tiny feral boy pushed out a sudden snarl as Baku took another step forward. It startled the man for a short second, but he quickly reverted back to his cool demeanor. Being nervous around this tailed kid will only stress him more and make things worse. Yet, behind the veil of courage and rage the wild child was demonstrating, Baku saw the weariness and sadness hidden in the boy’s eyes.

From the look of it, this tiny child was not completely an irrational feral boy without the knowledge of a civilized life. He was capable of showing off emotions like any sentient Gaians, yet he struggled to hide it. Perhaps this was to avoid showing his fears in front of unknown enemies as this was a weakness in the wilderness. However, Baku could not tell if the child possessed the knowledge of their language. “Hey, kiddo,” Baku hushed to him, keeping his voice low and reassuring while taking a very slow step. “We ain’t goin’ to bite you. Don’t bite us, okay?”

He was still growling, but at least, he seemed to have settled down a little thanks to the calm aura of the man. His feet had been ready to bounce over the stranger to claw him earlier, but his legs were now loosened down.

This time, after his single step, Baku maintained his distance. He slowed down his words. “Look. I don’t know where ya comin’ from, but whatever happened, we’re not goin’ to hurt ya, trust me on this.” Taking another step, Baku bended toward to lend him a hand.

A mistake. The child hurled an abrupt bark at him and he launched from his spot, intending at clawing the man’s face, only to trip awkwardly as a foot got stuck to a root that stood above the ground. The boy dropped face first to the wet ground with a high-pitched yelp, which brought a sudden muffled laugh from Cinna and Blank who got to witness everything from distance.

“Woah, that kiddo’s clumsier than he appears!” Cinna exclaimed with his silly grin.

Marcus looked at his two partners with an ashamed shake to the head and folding arms. “Well, he’s still a kid. Kids are clumsy by nature…” He

turned his attention over Blank and smiled. “Right, Blank?”

“Hey!” the red-haired boy protested, his hands turning into shaking fists before he was hit by snapping fingers by Marcus from behind. “Ow! Marcus! What was that f—”

“Hush,” Marcus told the furious boy, keeping his low tone and little smirk. “Told you to keep your voice quiet.”

“But that kid’s awake already!” Blank objected.

“But the boss needs all the calm he needs,” Marcus added, and Blank quieted down, returning his focus over the scene with their boss and the feral child.

As the tailed boy fought the mud to stand away from the ground, he crawled to the nearby artificial tiny pond, where he washed his face. Baku slowly made few steps forward. “Boy, you okay?” he asked.

But the child was not aiming to surrender. As he grasped at the man’s closer presence, he steadily jumped and landed on his feet, now adopting his aggressive and defensive stance once more. His low growls were coming back, but Baku refused to give up on him.

“So, what’s your name?” Baku asked.

The growls were not stopping.

“Does ‘Kuja’ ring any bells?”

There, at last, the reaction Baku had sought for since the beginning of their meeting!

The child’s feral, near inhuman expression immediately took another turn from aggressiveness to shock, which soon shifted to a sad distress. Instead of the seemingly wild creature before them, an innocent-looking child stood like a lost boy looking for mommy and daddy. “K-Kuja?” the small kid whispered to himself, eyes wide with small tears before his lips trembled. He seemed to be fighting to suppress the sniffles that wanted to come out.

Having in mind the child’s ability to speak some words at least, Baku’s worries washed away. Judging the kid’s behavior, he was now assured that he was not completely feral. That boy had been in contact with others before, though it was hard to tell if it had been with folks from their own civilization. Underneath his beard, the man began to smile.

“Oh, so the kiddo speaks!” He had adopted a cheerful voice, but the child appeared to be too busy

into lost thoughts to see the man's merrier stance. "Maybe 'Kuja's yer name?"

Hearing the name a second time brought even bigger tears and sniffles the boy had been attempting to tame. "Kuja…" he whispered again.

"Boss," Marcus called Baku from afar, holding his distance to allow more space for his boss and the crying child. "I don't think that's his name from his reaction. Pretty certain this's the name of his caregiver or a sibling or a family."

"Me thinks yer right on track," Baku responded to his underling before he returned to the crying child. "Hang in here, kiddo. We're here to help ya. Don't worry."

Slowly, Baku lowered himself to the boy's level before pulling out his hands toward his shoulders. However, when the child was taken out of his reverie and he became aware of the man approaching him, he quickly reverted to his wild, feral persona before bouncing backward and returning to his defensive pose. As the child's body shivered of fatigue and fear, Baku was surprised to hear no defensive growls returning to the small kid. The beard man could see through his veil of courage

that the child was too tired to even slip out effortless growls.

“You poor kiddo,” he began. “You’ve seen it rough, didn’t ya? Did monsters inflict all these injuries down on ya?”

The trembling child kept on with his defense, but Baku sensed like the boy was starting to let his guard down, though he could not tell if this was out of fatigue or a growing trust. He hoped for the latter, but at least he knew the word “Kuja” held some great importance to him, enough to calm the kid and make him cry. Perhaps Baku should look up for a certain “Kuja” for the next days…

But there was a universal solution to calm all feral creatures thriving on Gaia, a simple knowledge Baku thought it was best to put to use right now. It was common sense that everything alive on Gaia loved food and fought for it, either for survival or enjoyment. After all, even the wildest creatures were born to eat. If he could calm this child with food, Baku might as well offer him some. After all, the tailed kid did appear frail enough to be hungry.

“Wait, lemme get ya somethin’…” Baku went through one of his bags and got few dried nuts and fruits out of his palm. Taking precaution to move

slow, he offered it out to the kid who had suddenly adopted a curious stance when he saw the food on Baku's hands. When his expression was turning more childish and innocent, the boy made few slow steps forward, carefully inspecting the man's hands.

Attracting someone in need to fulfill his most basic instinct of eating appeared to work with wonders. "Here, boy. For ya. Don't be shy. Take them."

Taking closer but careful steps ahead, the child gave the delicious-looking food an intense gaze. Remaining alert, he finally stood mere inches away from Baku. Like a bolt, he caught the food with his tiny hands and immediately backed away, turning to the wall of the cliff where he crouched down to devour all the fruits and nuts away from them.

"Wow, not even a thanks or some recognition," Blank uttered to his companions with a pout and folded arms. "What kind of parents would raise such rude kids without manners?"

"Mmm… Can't say," Cinna stated. "He doesn't seem to talk much, and he does look feral, anyway. Maybe that explains it."

Deep in thoughts, Marcus added, “Well, from my own experiences and others, I can say for sure this kid doesn’t come from a very friendly environment. Maybe he’d been beaten to the bones, so he’s trusting no one.”

After he finished eating the food, the feral child turned to the four strangers who were giving him some long stares like they were curious of him. He stared back at them for a long minute, a minute that had appeared like an hour to the strangers, but Baku was the only one who kept up with his kind smile at him.

The smile seemed to indicate that these people were different from the monsters that roamed around the forest. The boy thought he might be safe to hang around them.

Yet, they were still strangers to him and he could not trust them yet.

However, when a yawn stopped him from glaring at the group, the child grasped that he wanted to sleep again. After all, he did not have much opportunity to enjoy recovering sleeps since he had landed in this strange Gaian place. Returning to the wall of the cliff, he curled against what looked like a

small cavity and lied on the ground, shutting his eyes and letting the slumber take over.

After ordering his subordinates to not move from where they stood and allowing few more minutes for the child to find his peace, Baku could finally hear the gentle snoring coming from the boy. He was now confident the kid will be able to get his full recovery with a true sleep, as long as someone was to watch over him. Going back to his three companions while giving a careful eye on the sleeping feral child, Baku expulsed a long sigh out of tiredness. Truth be told, this whole dealing with the tailed boy had been tiring to his mind.

“Sooo, wut are we gonna do with him, boss?” Cinna asked with a concerned look to the boy.

“Can’t leave the kiddo alone here and exposed to all the dangers of Pinnacle Rocks,” Baku responded without hesitation. “After all, we came here for fighting practice purpose on the dangerous monsters here, so this child’s bound to face great dangers here. Even if this kiddo can fend for himself, I won’t ever be able to rest until we can confirm he’s truly lost his caregivers. We’ll wait here with him until he’s recovered, and maybe his parents or family or whatever will be comin’ back for him.”

When he woke up, Zidane was surprised by a bright, warming light by his side.

However, like each time, he expected to see Kuja too.

Even if his hopes to see him had begun to fade by now, Zidane still had thoughts of his cherished big brother. He missed being held by him, playing with him, listening to him whine about their master, learning from him about Terra and Gaia. After all, Kuja was the only one who had ever given him care and love.

And young children like him coveted this warmth from bigger people. They needed their protection.

But this bright fire by his side implied that someone had created these flames, and knowing no one else but his brother who could achieve such a thing…

Perhaps he won’t be alone anymore!

With the starry night above his head, he was relieved to see that the torrent of rain had stopped now. Thanks to the clear sky, he decided it was time exploring this area to see if Kuja was around. If

there was fire, he must be somewhere close by! It must be the same camp fire Kuja would create whenever they'd explore the wild fauna of Gaia. Further away, another camp fire brightened the place with a silhouette sitting by. With a sudden joy pumping through his veins, Zidane could not suppress that broad smile from forming over his lips. Kuja was there!

"Kuja!" he called his brother, hoping to get his attention, which he did.

But as he approached the silhouette, he realized there was something strange about that shadow, because he clearly remembered that Kuja's body shape wasn't as wide, bulky and tall like this one. Upon inspecting the shadow as their physical silhouette became sharper, he discovered a man he did not know.

And then, it hit him.

It was the same man who had offered him food before he went back to sleep. When he looked around, he saw some erect, not very solid structures that looked like small houses made of clothing fabric with a similar appearance to a Moogle tent. He assumed that the three other companions who had

accompanied the tall man were sleeping inside these small houses.

The big man before him appeared wide awake, and when he noticed the child's presence, he offered him a kind smile. However, this time, Zidane sensed the serenity and positivism underneath this strange man with big bat ears and big beard. If this man had given him delicious food before, he might give some more, after all.

"You awake, boy!" Baku exclaimed as the boy approached him with slow and careful steps.

Curious about this man, Zidane stared at him like he was examining each angle and corner of him. This man possessed the same kind of cognition and sentience that Kuja and him were granted with, but he looked so different from a Genome or the other animals and monsters roaming on Gaia. This man had a beard like the mean old man, but it was shorter and purple. He did not have a tail like a Genome but purple fur was spread on his arms and legs. Additionally, he possessed big bat ears over his head and his eyes were hidden by weird googles. His overall shape differed so much from a regular slender body of a Genome as this man was covered with fat and big muscles.

And strangest of all, the man could speak, just like the Genomes and the mean old man. How could something so different from his kin be so lively and kind and be granted with the ability to speak sharp? Zidane did not understand, but he was intrigued about him.

Preserving the same short distance between the two, Zidane stayed there on his feet, straightened and not doing much but staring at the man. Baku suppressed a wild laugh that almost came out, careful to not scare and stress the boy again. “Hey, ya can come sit with me by the fire!” He opened his arms, with a hand going after the boy’s shoulder. “We can discuss of th—”

A sudden loud, feral hiss escaped out the child’s throat as soon as the contact had been made on his shoulder, causing both man and the kid to back away in shock and instinctive fear. However, seeing the man stayed still and quiet from his abrupt tantrum, the tailed boy calmed down and came closer again, this time exhibiting a pout and guilty eyes like he was apologizing.

“Ah, still doubtin’ me, am I right?” Baku said, his voice kept low to reassure the boy, and this seemed to be working well. ‘Fine, ya don’t have to sit with

me, but we still need to discuss.' He went after the same bag Zidane recognized as the one filled with food, and Baku reached out for an apple. After giving it a check, the man lent it out to the child who widened his eyes and his mouth in shock. "This's for you. Hope you're hungry."

Zidane loved the fruits of Gaia. They were sweet and juicy, and they were yummier than any synthetic food on Terra and much better than any raw meat from their preys. For this man to supply him with food a second time suggested that this person was not a bad creature. Zidane approached the man further, and without hesitating, he caught the fruit and devoured it in a matter of seconds. This time, he hadn't gone anywhere far from the man. He stayed by him and Baku appeared pleased with the result.

"Ya know, we don't find kids, or even normal people, often in Pinnacle Rocks," the bearded man asserted to the child and he looked up to the sky, deep in thoughts. "I don't know about yer history, but obviously, ya didn't lead a normal, peaceful life, right?"

Taking the last bite of his apple, Zidane continued to listen to him. From the look in his eyes, it still wasn't clear to Baku if the child understood what he

was telling him. After discarding the middle of the fruit, Zidane gave the man another curious glare before walking around him, his stare never leaving him. Yet, Baku never stopped smiling at him. “Now that I’ve gained yer trust, I can tell ya my name. I’m Baku, Baku Tribal.”

The boy remained mute, but his interest took over once again. Now in near physical contact with the man, Zidane raised himself on his toes, with his hands now reaching after the strange fuzzy, sensitive ears on Baku. Surprised by it, the man giggled and hollered, “Hey! Stop it! It tickles!”

Baku’s abrupt reaction gave Zidane a moment of jolt, but the child was quick to revert to his calm, curious self. He blinked, amazed by the man’s huge bat ears. “Bwahaha!” the man laughed out loud, and this time, Zidane was no longer scared by his loud reaction. “Sorry, boy, not used to being touched to the ears!”

This situation was looking more awkward than ever, with Baku staying on the ground and Zidane staring at him with near vacant eyes. Baku had seen the wounds on the boy before, but it was only now he could see the extent of the rude life the child must have led until now. This boy definitely needed his

family and a home. “Ya look like you had it rough, and that’s probably why you’re all strong and wild and all. Yet, I can see the pure innocence in yer eyes.”

As if the child had been listening with attentive ears, Zidane adopted another sad pose. He had his head lowered, watching the ground like he was apologizing for the way he had been acting with the man until now. Of course, Baku could not tell what was going on in the child’s mind, but he thought to be better if he went with the flow of fate and did as if the boy understood him. “Now that I told ya my name, can you tell me yours?”

Lost in thoughts, the boy gazed to the ground in silence, seemingly shy about the man’s request and unsure what to say about it. He turned his sight over him once again, all in quietness, until he walked by Baku’s side. The tailed child kneeled toward the ground and began to use a finger to trace some scribbles on the sandy part of the ground, near the fire. The shock hit Baku hard when he watched the boy’s moves as he had not expected him to be actually capable of drawing. Yet, what appeared even more astounding were the written letters forming under the boy’s moving fingers. Baku read

out loud each letter that appeared slowly on the sand.

“Zidane,” Baku pronounced after spelling each letter like a proud parent felt like when their own children showed off their first written words. He returned his focus to the child. “Zidane, that’s yer name, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

In fact, Baku had not expected Zidane to even say another word. So, it seemed the boy was truly capable of speaking, writing and understanding the man. Why the child could only say few words but not his own name might be a question that will remain unanswered for some time, but for now, he should focus on trying to get the kid docile with him.

But all this meant one thing, Baku was certain now. Someone had raised this kid before. “Oh, so ya can speak more than one word and ya can write! It’ll make everything easier now!”

Realizing the man really looked proud and happy for him, Zidane didn’t know why he was responding with a sudden smile too. Maybe a smile was a universal language suggesting that one could trust

the other, and right now, Zidane knew he could trust this man by the name of Baku. No longer doubting the bearded man, the child decided it was time to approach him even closer and sit by his sides. As he positioned himself on his rear, Zidane gave out a long, exhausted yawn. The poor boy. Probably still as tired and not very talkative.

They sat like this for few more minutes, contemplating the starry sky together. With a kind laugh, Baku hushed, “Heh? Still quiet as ever? Don’t worry. At least I know ya can understand our language. If ya come with us, maybe we’ll find your caregiver and then w—”

His words were cut short when he sensed something crawling to his legs. He looked down to see Zidane curling himself between his curved legs, his head rested on Baku’s thigh like a fortune pillow before he let another yawn out and he closed his eyes to sleep. The man was stunned how the little tailed boy was able to fit in such small space like a cat in a tiny box.

After few minutes, the soft snores came.

Careful to not wake the child, Baku huffed a gentle chuckle. Giving Zidane the comfort he needed, Baku softly stroked and patted his hair.

Keeping his hushing tone, he whispered, “You sleepy head. Guess you’re still tired from everything that’s been happening to ya. Hopefully, we’ll find your home so ya won’t ever be alone again.”

The End

Author’s note*: Without Kuja for the brotherly love, I guess I’ll just add parental fluff with Baku instead. A part of me wants that, canonly, Kuja did care about Zidane when they were together on Terra. Garland might have told Zidane that Kuja had “abandoned” him on Gaia when he was 4 to leave him to die, but if Kuja was bright enough, he would have simply killed him. So, maybe Kuja really wanted to save Zidane from a sad fate of being Garland’s puppet? Garland could have told Zidane has been abandoned just to screw his mind since he intended to take his soul anyway. Also, I mean, at the end of the game, Kuja demonstrates that he still has some compassion for his brother, so that must mean something, right?*

I know in the game, Zidane doesn’t remember anything about Kuja, Garland or his life on Terra, except for the “blue light”. Most of the backstories

I've read about him show that he had lost his memory after some blunt incident. Personally, I can't remember my life before my fifth year of life except for few flashes, so I like to think that Zidane has gone through a similar generic experience instead of just losing his memory suddenly. The fact that he can't speak much in this fic at a young age kind of helps that he cannot explain to the Tantalus guys that he hails from another world, so I guess that works well in-game.

As for Blank, I always thought he's slightly older than Zidane by short years, maybe like 2 or 3 years older, thus why he's seven in this chapter.

Special Ending: What

I'm sorry for the lateness of this chapter. I blame Metroid Dread, the 2D original game I've been literally waiting for 17 years (I'm a Metroid fangirl).

***Disclaimer**: I do not own Final Fantasy IX and its characters. Square Enix owns them.*

Special Ending: What

This long silence was starting to become awkward.

When No. 288 finally made an action, it was to lay the notebook to his knees with a long sigh which came to an abrupt end when he realized Mikoto stood right before him, her near expressionless eyes giving a long stare at the Black Mage. Through the dark face, a strange uneasiness was hinted which Mikoto was able to spot. Yet, this was not stopping her from staring at him for another long moment as she expected him to say a word, or something. However, No. 288 only blinked, uncertain of what he should tell the Genome girl.

Exhausted but ready to go home, he slapped the notebook on the table that separated him and the

girl, a sudden move that had taken Mikoto by surprise. She made a jolt backward, having not expected someone as calm as No. 288 to make such an abrupt action. After the quietness set in, Mikoto returned to her original pose with the same empty glare at the mage. However, No. 288 saw the tiny sparkles of joyful tears shining and flickering in her eyes. The mage sighed again, but he understood the reasoning behind the girl's bizarre acting.

After all, he had just read her entire piece of fiction, a piece she wrote out of the blue from a sudden inspiration when she had learned that her brother Kuja had actually spent four years raising their middle brother Zidane. She hadn't been told if Kuja had done it out of love, obligation or both, but she remained intrigued of what had happened during Zidane's first four years of life until Kuja had "thrown him away" on Gaia. Mikoto did not understand why Kuja had taken such an immoral decision that had led to a chain of significant events. Yet, this had, nevertheless, inspired her to reimagine what it might have been like if her two older brothers had thrived their whole life together until the events of the year 1800.

Well, thanks to Kuja's fateful decision, they were able to throw Master Garland out and the Genomes

could now flourish without him.

After spending months writing her piece of fiction in a huge notebook, Mikoto had pled to each Black Mages if one could offer a help to proofread her work of more than three hundred pages. Unfortunately to her, the bulk thickness of the notebook had scared all of them away. Thankfully, No. 288 stood out among them and he had accepted to read it out of pity.

However, No. 288 only did this as a thanks to the Genomes for tending to Kuja's injuries and for keeping him alive, allowing him to get the redemption for all his past sins. It was thanks to his second chance that the young Genome mage was able to find a way to prolong the Black Mages' lifespan, making it as long as it should be on a normal Human. Thanks to Kuja's quick action to save the Black Mages, all the remaining Mages prior to their end of their adventures still lived to see the beauty of today.

Yet, after realizing what he had been committing into when he had started reading this fictional story, at random instants during his reading which had spread into the span of three intensive days, he almost wished he wasn't alive. If he wasn't, he

would not have felt compelled to read this extremely long story.

Or sometimes, he wished he could simply be a coward like his other Black Mage brothers and flee the notebook.

To be fair, he wished he hadn’t accepted to read this notebook depicting the strangest piece of fiction coming from Mikoto’s imagination. The fact the entire story was depressing and with another more obvious detail that she had given the title of her story “Alone” implied that Mikoto might be feeling lonely. No. 288 did not understand how Mikoto could feel lonely, living in their exciting village surrounded by happy Black Mages and Genomes who were starting to acquire an individuality over the years.

“I want to know what you are thinking of my story,” Mikoto finally said something, though her face seemed too close to No. 288. Feeling insecure over the girl, he moved backward slightly, or else, both faces might touch each other. Her voice did not sound very lively, but this was how Garland had conceived her. He knew beneath, she was filled with emotions and everything that made up someone with a soul.

No. 288 swallowed. He did not know whether he should be honest with her or not. He'd rather read joyful stories with happy endings and easier words. It had taken him so long to finish reading this story until the end, three long days in complete immersion of depression and sadness, things which he did not enjoy.

Giving into a very slow and long inhalation, No. 288 said, "I feel this story needs more joy."

No. 288 expected a negative reaction. Instead, Mikoto did not flinch much except for the fast blinking of her lids and the sudden movement of her tail which had now curled down like it resigned to defeat. "How can I make this story happy when I think this is what would have happened if my brothers grew up together?" she answered, her voice still monotone but gaining a little strength, though this sounded like she was in complete denial of the mage's semi-constructive criticism. Truth be told, she was searching for his praise, but she realized she might not even get any from him.

The Black Mage shook his head. "I don't know, but reading your story made me sad," he admitted. "This world needs to be happier after all it has gone through. You should have written another happier

story without involving real-life people, like a fairy tale with a happy ending."

Mikoto blinked again, uncertain what to make out of the comment. After what appeared like few minutes of deep thoughts, at last she physically backed away from No. 288, to his relief. The girl gazed up, stroking her chin and thinking. While it was still hard reading her emotions, No. 288 was able to tell that her enthusiasm had come back when he spotted her tail curling up and down, its movement syncing with her thumb and index brushing on her chin. "You might be right," the Genome girl remarked, which brought more relief to the mage. At least she did not seem angry by his honest comment, but she appeared so disappointed when the sparkles of hope left her eyes. "The world is already sad, and we need happy stories to help Gaia. Do you think I should discard my story, then?"

"No, no!" the mage objected. Was she ready to throw away such a long piece she had taken months to write? "This is a fine story, I think. But you should make this story happier. I don't know… Maybe making Kuja and Zidane good guys in this story to reflect the good guys they are right now."

“Oh,” Mikoto said. For a moment, the joy of inspiration seemed to have manifested on the young girl again. She even smiled, a little. “You’re right. I will write another version of their story.”

“Is that so? Well, take your time,” No. 288 suggested.

“Hmm, how long is my time, then?” the tailed girl asked.

Under his hat, the mage suddenly sweated. “Uh… ALL the time you’ll need…” he insisted, already dreading of the next time he’ll have to read another very long story from her.

“Oh, well, that’s a long time, I think,” Mikoto commented, her small smile already vanishing and turning into a disappointed pout.

They stayed quiet for some long minutes before No. 288 broke the silence. “Do your brothers know about your story?” he asked.

The blinking Mikoto exhibited this time suggested a lot of discomfort and the mage saw the gulp on her throat. “No,” she answered.

What a blunt answer, but this was not enough as a reply for the mage. “Why not?” the mage proposed.

“I don’t know about Zidane, but Kuja’s good with complex words and he’s a good writer. Why not asking him to proofread it for y—”

“NO!” she repeated, nearly screaming at the mage who jumped from the sudden cry. There was even a perceptible fear in her voice. No. 288 couldn’t help but frown at her. Why did she refuse to let her brothers read the story about them? He did not understand Humans and Genomes alike.

“HEY, MIKOTO!”

The door of their hut burst open behind their back, jolting both residents standing inside. Mikoto and No. 288 turned around to get an unexpected visit by facing one of the two main subjects of Mikoto’s piece of fiction. “Zidane?” the Genome girl called the grinning young man at the door who stood against the sunlight. The middle brother of the Terran angel family offered them a casual waving hand. However, the girl frowned at him. “You did not have to shout. You scared us.”

“Oh, sorry about that!” Zidane exclaimed, his grin having turned nervous and guilty now. “I know I came all of a sudden, but I’m just happy to see my dear little sister and No. 288 again after months of absence!”

“Is Queen Garnet mad at you again?”

Zidane froze and gulped. He should have known it better than anyone else, but he did not expect his sister to call on his façade so bluntly. However, he had to remember that Mikoto had grown up on Terra surrounded by soulless vessels. Even if their kin were starting to pick on their own individualities and cores that made up soulful people, Mikoto seemed to remain the same blunt Genome with a soul. It was that blunt personality of hers that gave her correct on most of her deductions. Just like this one.

This was true. His wife was mad at him again.

Ever since Zidane had become a prince consort to his wife Dagger, or rather, Queen Garnet, years ago, most of his visits to the Black Mages village had consisted of whining about his boring royal life and missing the thrilling adventures with his friends. Life in the Alexandrian castle was such a borefest he’d often slip out of the castle to get on a trip with his Tantalus family or to have fun in taverns without any royal escort to protect him, pretending he didn’t need protection, all without Dagger’s knowledge. It had been during one of these unroyal trips to a tavern where he had woken up in a dark alley of the shadier parts of Alexandria with a nasty hangover.

However, what had driven the Queen into refusing to see him for a whole month was how he had been ridden of his entire royal jewelries during that hangover, including his wedding ring and all his gil. For that month, Zidane had escaped to the Outer Continent, seeking refuge among his Genome kin and especially his sister Mikoto and his brother Kuja. He had first gone to his adoptive father Baku in his hideout in Lindblum, but the man had thrown him out for being too dumb of a prince.

Whenever he was in trouble because of his own guilty actions, he'd spend weeks in the Black Mages village until the traveling Moogle Stiltzkin would tell him that Dagger had forgiven him, which she would always do eventually.

"Yeah," Zidane admitted to his sister, his head low like he was ashamed of himself.

"Zidane, what did you do this time?" Mikoto asked, her tone very direct and filled with some anger and exhaustion. The girl, despite her youth, always had to play the wise, older sister to Zidane who she deemed so immature.

"I swear this wasn't my fault!" Zidane insisted like if he was objecting to her, all nervous. "Dagger thought to be ready to adopt an orphan kid, since we

can’t have kids together! So, she forced me to babysit Rusty and Rose’s baby boy for training purpose since she wanted to offer them a day off from their duty as knights and parents. So, since I’m the prince consort, well… I guess I’ll have to be the caregiver of the two of us… But… Rusty’s kid’s super loud and annoying! He wouldn’t stop crying with me as if he had inherited Rusty’s hatred for me or something! So, hmm… I decided I was too desperate to take care of him, and I went to bring the baby back to daddy to Rusty’s private quarters, only to witness him and Rose doing… you know…”

“Oh, they were having a sexual intercourse?” Mikoto asked, still blunt, and this brought horror to Zidane’s face.

“Mikoto!” the brother shouted at his sister, horrified by the straight term she was using to describe the scene he had seen. “Don’t speak of it so loud!”

“I’m not a child,” the near forgotten No. 288 commented, now frowning at the ridiculous young man. “I know what sex is.”

“No. 288! Not you too!” Zidane protested in shock before he calmed down and continued his story. “Anyway, Rusty ran after me, intended on

killing me. Rose told about the accidental witnessing to my dear Dagger, and unfortunately, she took it as cheating! I couldn't believe this! I had to escape!"

"So, that's why you're taking refuge here," Mikoto added.

"Until further notice!" Zidane completed with a wide, yet guilty grin on his face, "I've already requested Stiltzkin to let me know when Dagger will calm down!"

"Zidane, you know it is rude to interrupt your little sister's chat when she's having a private conversation with a friend."

Now, this was a voice he had not heard for a while. Zidane turned around to see his former nemesis, his older brother Kuja, leaning on the entrance door with his arms crossed and his assured smile imprinted on his lips. Seeing their elder sibling always granted a certain joy upon Zidane as he would be reminded of the time he had been offered to save Kuja, giving him a second chance for redemption. No one knew how Kuja had survived his programmed death, but Zidane suspected the long care from the Black Mages and the constant healing from his Genome brethren had allowed Kuja to live.

Nevertheless, however Kuja was able to recover no longer had any importance. What truly mattered of this merry ending was that Kuja lived, and he was now spending his life to help everyone around him to make up for his grave mistakes. While he was no longer allowed to roam on the Mist Continent, the Queen of Alexandria had accepted to let him live, thanks to a lot of convincing from her husband Zidane. Ever since, Kuja had spent time socializing with the inhabitant of the village, Black Mages and Genomes alike, and with the Dwarves of Conde Petie. Thanks to his great scientific knowledge he had acquired from Terra and his life on Gaia, he had been able to prolong the Black Mages' lives using the remnant of the Mist and create a revolutionary medicine that had helped humanity prosper, which the Genomes had shared with the rest of the world.

But even if he was to be allowed to roam on the Mist Continent again, Kuja would rather remain here. He found salvation by helping his Genome kin and the Black Mages by sharing his knowledge with them and teaching other miscellaneous things, like writing and even making others feel more beautiful. Then in turn, they spread his knowledge to the world.

All this was thanks to Zidane's guts of needing no reason to help someone. The young man was so glad to see the fruit of his rescue spreading since Gaia needed all the help available after losing so much, even if it had to come from the main cause of Gaia's loss.

"Oh, hey, Kuja!" the middle brother called the elder sibling. "You just came in time to hear about my unluckiest adve—"

"I heard you," Kuja interrupted him, smiling at him. "You were speaking of the canary's knights and your misadventures with their baby son. From what I have been gathering, you were probably a worse baby when Garland had created you."

The statement brought Zidane to a shame for a reason he ignored. He froze before he stuttered out of mortification, "W-What? Don't tell me you have embarrassing stories about baby me!"

"I was not even thinking about that," Kuja said, chuckling at his brother's silliness and overreaction. This was to be expected from a former brat. "However, now that you have brought it up, I can always share few embarrassing moments from when you were an infant."

“PLEASE, NO!” a horrified Zidane pled out, frantic. “I don’t want anyone to know! I don’t want to know!”

Watching both brothers in their silly tantrum somehow brought an unexplained discomfort to Mikoto. She tried suppressing the blush on her face, never wanting to admit that their dumb and senseless verbal fights were ones of her biggest inspirations for that long story in her big notebook, which she hugged out like she tried protecting it.

But Kuja had good eyes for nervous tics. He was quick to spot her edgy move. “Mikoto? What are you holding?” the elder brother asked, now curious about the well-carved book.

“Nothing of interest,” she quickly responded, trying to keep her voice stoic, but her shaking tail surrendered her uneasiness away.

“Nothing of interest?” Kuja repeated after her, his light, yet mocking tone manifesting his perfect sarcastic and narcissist endeavor, the one the Gaians knew from his past war mastermind persona. His old, teasing manners never died despite having befriended Terrans and Gaians alike. “Pray tell, little sister, if this notebook is unworthy of my curiosity,

then there is nothing wrong into letting me take a look at it."

Now, this had taken in Zidane's interest to her notebook, even if he had completely missed it before, too busy being restless about his silly tale in Alexandria. Grinning at her, he began, "Kuja's right! Can we take a look? I'm curious, now!"

"No," Mikoto objected, turning away from them and even hugging her notebook tighter like she needed to make it disappear somewhere. Her move had intensified her brothers' curiosity to the point they both were mere inches away from her, trying to take a peek at the notebook together.

"I must say… This is a very intriguing, nicely carved book for a simple notebook," Kuja commented, broadening his wicked smile. "Are you sure you don't want us to take a look at it?"

"NO!" she shouted out of instinct, even scaring herself and all who were present around her.

Realizing that Kuja wasn't giving up, Zidane decided to play the peacemaker. He caught his brother's shoulder and shook his head. "Kuja, it's useless," he told him, and Kuja listened. "If this

object’s a personal thing to her, I guess we should just leave her by.”

As the brothers left their sister to go on their ways, when Kuja returned to take a stroll in the forest and forget about this notebook incident, Zidane remained preoccupied by Mikoto’s mysterious acting. For someone with a stoic, blunt behavior, seeing her acting all odd and nervous around a simple notebook worried him. Was the notebook filled with her fears? Was she writing personal events in it, like a diary? Was she depressed of her life? Was this why she had been confiding to No. 288?

Had Zidane actually burst in their most private conversation and most confidential moment?

When he asked No. 288 about it, the mage shook his head and told him he had nothing to do with anything and that he was innocent. His response raised some suspicion. Shocked by his reaction, Zidane uttered, “What? I just want to know what’s inside Mikoto’s notebook!”

Exasperated by Zidane’s upsetting insistence, the mage decided to play along. “What’s inside the notebook? Letters and scribbles.”

The Genome sighed. “No! I mean, what’s written in it?”

“Told you. Letters and sentences.”

“Please, No. 288!” He was now begging to the point he was close to kneel before the mage and his eyes formed pleading puppy eyes. “You know what I mean! Can’t you just summarize what story or fears she wrote in it?”

“I can’t,” the Black Mage revealed. “This is a co-author’s secret.”

Co-author? Now, this hunt for the notebook’s suspicious contents had become more and more lusting and intriguing. Realizing he’ll get nothing out of the mage, Zidane renounced to defeat. However, he was already formulating a plan to find out soon. Oh yes, he’ll find out! They did not call him the mischievous thief of Tantalus for nothing.

When Mikoto will be too busy to even think of her notebook, this will be his time to shine and get the book for himself.

“Zidane, if my assumptions are right, you truly are planning to read her notebook.” Zidane heard Kuja speaking behind his back and he turned to him.

“Were you spying on me?” Zidane grumbled after him with folded arms.

“No,” Kuja answered, always keeping up with his gentle, yet malicious smile hinting the bluntness of his words. ‘We might have been living apart for years, and yet, I know you enough to deem you as a brat, and brats are very predictable.’ This comment granted a pout and a frown from the blond young man. “Though I admit I did overhear you and No. 288 speaking, and he left you, quite furiously, I must say. You even told me to give up on Mikoto’s book, so don’t bother. Just leave her in her secrecy. She’s still an adolescent who needs her privacy.”

“Oh, really, now,” Zidane commented, his pout turning into a grin and his arms relieved of the tension. With a huff, he poked Kuja to the arm. “Weren’t you the one who were really, REALLY insistent into knowing the contents of her notebook too?”

The silver-haired Genome laughed. How could his younger sibling be that oblivious? He poked over the smaller man’s head, which he fought off. “Zidane,” Kuja called him. “You, of all, should know better than anyone, that little brain of yours cannot detect that sarcasm in my voice. My

comments and actions of earlier were only an act of mockery to, just you know, mess with Mikoto a little. Teasing her and the other Genomes is a great way to forge their individualities like a true Gaian with a soul."

"But Mikoto has a soul already," Zidane objected.

Nevertheless, Kuja agreed. "Yes, aren't you right, my dear little brother. However, Mikoto had grown up in an environment surrounded by empty shells. She had prospered in a world without having seen a true soul other than herself. She is still struggling to manifest her own emotions and she is still learning."

"Oh," the blond young man let out, his brother's latest statement shutting him. This was a fight he wasn't going to win, after all. Ever since they had learned to become siblings with each other after the events of 1800, Zidane had hardly ever won an argument against Kuja and it bothered him, somehow. It was true, Kuja was the brain just as Zidane was the brute force. He had to change the subject again. "So, hm, you're not going to agree with me into finding out the contents of her notebook?"

"No. Good bye." And with this, Kuja bid farewell and walked away.

Well, this was disappointing. If Kuja would have accepted to come along in his plan, it might have made things easier. Zidane will have to plan something without involving anyone but himself. When he returned to his sister's hut, he spied on her for some while, only to discover, to his pleasant surprise, that she was enclosing her notebook inside a locked chest.

Too bad for her. Zidane will have to unleash his unlocking skills once again when she won't be looking.

"I am going to Conde Petie for a week to get supplies for the village with No. 163, No. 293 and Luna."

This was looking too good to be true. Not even a day had gone by since his arrival on the Outer Continent that his little sister had taken the decision to leave for a week. It felt like fate had responded to his plea to satisfy his unhealthy curiosity of reading her notebook which will be fully available to him without her presence.

However, the latest name got him to blink in confusion. "Luna?" he asked.

Mikoto rolled her eyes at him. “You don’t know your Genome siblings? She’s one of them,” she revealed, and Zidane sighed.

“They all look the same!” he protested like he was telling her that he was innocent, and Mikoto sulked at him.

“The Black Mages look pretty much all the same too, and you can tell them apart.”

Before their tantrums were going to turn into siblings’ verbal fights, Mikoto quickly left the village with the mages and the other Genome who Zidane still did not recognize. Having been in the Alexandrian castle most of his time in his latest years of marriage had taken a toll on him and made him forget few faces. He recalled having learned of his Genome siblings’ names few times, but it felt so long ago that he hadn’t met them that whenever he came to the village, he’d just call them with a simple “Hey, you!”.

Pretty moronic move, but the idea had been working so far… until now.

Nevertheless, he had to focus on something else. Mikoto was gone now and she won’t be back for another week. It was the best time to check on that

mysterious famous notebook. Of course, he had to be certain that the other Genomes and the Black Mages won't see through his thieving mischief, or they might call on him if they will see him intrude into his sister's hut. The other Genomes might have no true souls yet, but they were starting to earn an individuality from their forging core, thus they could snitch on him as much as the Black Mages.

When nighttime came around the corner, he trusted that no one was looking at him. He sneaked into Mikoto's home and searched for the chest which he was quick to discover. Using a pin he would always keep in his pockets, he unlocked the chest and found the shiny notebook which was covered with cute colored pebbles. When he took hold of it and lit a candle, he began to read the cover, with only one word written on it.

Alone.

Wait, why "Alone"? Was Mikoto actually writing her personal diaries in this notebook? Was she feeling lonely? Was her feeling of loneliness the reason she had been confiding to No. 288?

There was only one way to find out. If this was one method to help his little sister to bring her more

confidence and love, Zidane had no choice but to read the notebook contents.

“Mikoto, we need to talk.”

Whenever someone called another because they “needed to talk”, Mikoto knew for sure this meant a serious prospect coming. She had not expected Kuja to come to her as soon as she made her first step in the village after her trip with the supplies. Even more worrisome were the uncertainties in Kuja’s eyes despite his usual refined and confident allure. Knowing about his now lesser, but still lingering arrogant nature, seeing him anxious like this appeared even less natural on him and thus making this situation more aggravating. “What is the matter?” Mikoto asked him.

“I worry about Zidane’s state.” Well, this was strange. Kuja had never looked too concerned about Zidane. After all, they’d been nemesis before, and their brotherly rivalry had remained strong after the events of the year 1800. If Kuja was genuinely worried of his brother, then it might be something severe and unexpected. “I fear that our middle brother might be losing his mind. Ever since you

have gone to Conde Petie, he'd spend entire days in the Water Mill uttering nonsenses to Bobby Corwen."

Now, this was an unexpected news. Mikoto frowned, trying to show her worries. While she was truly worried, she still had a hard time expressing some emotions properly. "What happened to Zidane?"

"He refuses to let me know," Kuja answered with a sigh. "For few days, I've failed at gathering information from him and what worries him, and then I've asked the others in the village. Unfortunately, no one can tell what has happened to him. I renounced after spending a day at attempting to get him to talk, and now, he will only accept the presence of others in the mill if they bring him and Bobby Corwen food. Perhaps we will be able to shed some light in this matter if we go see him together."

Wasting no time, Kuja and Mikoto walked to the mill where, unsurprisingly, Zidane was there, sitting on the hay and speaking to Bobby Corwen. Their discussion started with the Genome young man saying how he wished he could have been a Tetra Master champion and how he'd conquer so many

women with his title. “Zidane, you’re married,” Kuja interrupted his brother’s chat with the chocobo when he was about to tell about winning glorious women’s doors to their sweet gardens.

Zidane turned away from the big bird and drew his attention on the one who had talked, where he faced his siblings. Oblivious to their worries and not minding that Mikoto appeared more worried than Kuja, Zidane frowned at them. “Yeah, yeah, sure, Mr. I-Can’t-Read-Your-Mind,” Zidane said with a childish pout and folded arms. “I’m guessing this would have been super silly, either way.”

“What are you speaking about?” Kuja sighed at him. “You keep uttering exasperating nonsenses for days. Care to tell us what’s happening? Mikoto and I worry about you.”

“Oh, hey, maybe I killed the king!” Zidane exclaimed, his pout disappearing to shift into his widest grin. “Oh wait, that can’t be! I’m technically the king! I mean, wait, prince consort, but… Yeah, the real king, I’m married to his daughter!”

“Zidane! Stop it!” Kuja shouted louder this time, using an authoritarian voice, the same one found in strict big brothers. The shout had even frozen the young man in a short stupor. Satisfied by Zidane

shutting up, Kuja quickly turned to their sister. “Please, Mikoto, can you lend me a hand in this? He is your brother, too.”

However, when Kuja glared into Mikoto’s eyes, there was something strange. Instead of the worry he had seen on her earlier, he saw embarrassment and shyness. She appeared to be lost in thoughts. With a humph, Kuja waved before her, stirring her away from her thoughts. “Oh!” she began after shaking her head, now back to the reality where she will have to face her middle brother. “Hmm, Zidane, please, tell us what’s happening.”

“Hey, maybe you can read me if you want to know!” Zidane hollered before bouncing back on his feet, his fists now on his waists. Standing like a proud kid, he started to exclaim, “You know what? I’m going back to my Dagger! I’m a married man, after all!”

Dammit, the more they discussed, the less Zidane was making sense. This was not good. Kuja slapped his forehead, but Mikoto was still struck with discomfort. “Did you not say that you were going to wait for Stiltzkin to confirm that Dagger has forgiven you?” the young sister asked, keeping her stoic voice.

“Screw Stiltzkin!” the blond young man cried before he flashed to the door. “I’m a grown man! I don’t need any Moogle to help me! I can deal with Dagger myself! See ya, guys!”

And with this, Zidane disappeared.

“Well,” Kuja sighed and shook his head. “That did not go well. I am under the impression it even went worse than with my previous attempts.”

But deep inside her core, Mikoto had a hunch of what had truly happened, though she hoped that her assumptions were wrong. Yet, she knew she’ll have to face the truth eventually, and to check if she was right, she rushed to her home. When she reached to her room, she saw it.

There, her secret chest was opened, all available to everyone naughty enough to take a look inside. Her personal notebook was lying on the table, exposed to the last page.

Only one person here was capable of unlocking the chest and opening the notebook.

She could only say, “Oh.”

Of course, with Zidane speaking of being a “Tetra Master champion”, uttering about the ‘mind reading’

comments and “killing the king”, it all came to one fact.

Unfortunately for her, she was right.

…

When Kuja opened the door to Mikoto’s home, he found the place to be empty of her. Disappointed, he was about to leave until something shiny in the trash caught his attention. Curious, Kuja went to take a closer look and he discovered it was the well-carved notebook Mikoto had been trying to protect from her brothers. Being a collector of beautiful things, the silver-haired Genome decided that if Mikoto was not needing it anymore, then she’ll have no objection if he’ll keep it for himself.

Having nothing else to do for tonight, as soon as he returned to his hut, he lied down on his bed and started to read the first page.

The End

Author’s note*: It’s always been a tradition for me to add a silly ending to all my “serious” stories, so here’s one. I admit this one totally rips off a silly*

ending of one of my Ace Attorney fanfics. I'm losing inspiration. :(

I know I said that I don't ship Zidane with anyone, but Zidane x Garnet/Dagger is technically canon, so they are married in this ending. Of course, I'm not a romance fan, so still no romance, lol.

But yeah, let's say Kuja's alive in this ending too. I mean, the game doesn't explicitly say that Kuja dies, and there must be a reason why there are new Vivis in the ending too. Maybe Kuja's behind this. This game needs a sequel or a true remake, like the FFVII one but better. Please, make it happen!

Also, I want to add that I never beg for reviews or anything, but I sincerely thank anyone reading this fic and anyone who comment! You rock!

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